

## Beyond institutional critique: Mark Dion's surrealist *wunderkammer* at the Manchester Museum

Marion Endt\*

University of Manchester

---

### Abstract

Mark Dion's *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy*, which opened at the Manchester Museum in May 2005, seems to represent a crossover between an old curator's office, a storage room and a sixteenth-century cabinet of curiosities. This essay closely examines two aspects of the installation, its inaccessibility and its concern with 'alternative', pre-Enlightenment taxonomy and classification, and explores in which ways they contrast and challenge the Museum's display strategies. It investigates how the artist, by drawing on the university museum's *wunderkammer* legacy and taking a detour via surrealism in the process, manages to undermine the binary logic earlier forms of institutional critique got entrapped in. By engaging in a symbiotic and cooperative, rather than parasitic and aggressive, relationship with the institution, the artist reminds us to focus on the museum's 'unique selling propositions': the object's historicity and the employees' specialist expertise. The paper draws on the ideas of André Breton, Roger Caillois and Michel de Certeau to show how Dion proposes a new understanding of what is meant by 'institutional critique'.

**Key Words:** Mark Dion, institutional critique, cabinet of curiosity, surrealism, interactivity, taxonomy and classification, interdisciplinarity

So I say freeze the museum's front rooms as a time capsule and open up the laboratories and storerooms to reveal art and science as the dynamic processes that they are. (Dion 1997: 19)

### No more questions for white walls

Mark Dion's *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy*, which opened at the Manchester Museum in May 2005 and will remain on view until the end of 2008 (with the prospect of becoming a permanent installation), marks the provisional endpoint of a series of projects in which the American artist investigates the institutional context of the natural history and university museum. Born in 1961 and a graduate of the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York, Dion's work is profoundly influenced by artists associated with the practice of 'institutional critique', such as Marcel Broodthaers, Joseph Beuys, Robert Smithson and Hans Haacke; in addition, he is continuously engaged in a fruitful exchange with his peers Fred Wilson, Christian Philipp Müller, Andrea Fraser and Renée Green.<sup>1</sup> After a series of overtly political, pedagogical early works, which, insofar as they tackled environmental issues, came to be labelled 'green art', Dion moved on to more complex projects in which he explored the assumptions underpinning institutions concerned with the representation of nature. He differentiates between two kinds of institutional critique, placing himself into the second group:

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 cultural institution. (Dion 1997: 16)

He constructs a lineage between the museum-sceptical avant-garde, most notably Duchamp and Buñuel, according to the latter it is 'more interesting to blow up a museum than to visit one' (Dion, Dezeuze, Kelly and Lomas 2005: 10) and a generation of artists emerging in the late 1960s, who denounced museums as 'un-correctable sites of ideology' (Dion, Dezeuze, Kelly and Lomas 2005: 10).<sup>2</sup> While these artists largely focused on exposing the ideological and economical frameworks museums of fine art are embedded in, Dion early on identified 'the situation of "endgameness" in which many conceptualist critiques of the gallery found themselves' (Coles 1999: 46) – the perception that practices attacking the museum as an institution got increasingly institutionalized themselves and, as a result, were trapped in a new kind of formalism – and thus moved on to examining the sites of the natural history and university rather than the fine arts museum ('I have no more questions for white walls!', Coles 1999: 46), to embracing the discourses of science and natural history and to substituting harsh critique for a more open and fruitful concept of cooperation. Compared to the earlier generation of 'institutional critique' artists whose museum interventions were essentially informed by social and political concerns – an example would be Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* at Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore in 1992-3, which aimed at exposing the museum's colonialist practices – Dion's focus shape towards an epistemological critique. Both artists are interested in how museums shape our perception of culture and nature through the collection, classification and presentation of artefacts and specimens, but Dion chooses the natural history and university museum rather than the art or history museum for his critique, because they are the very sites of knowledge production and meaning making. While artists engaged in earlier forms of institutional critique such as Michael Asher and Daniel Buren are concerned with the commodification and cultural uplift of art, Dion leaves the white cube behind and asks "'bigger" questions' (Coles 1999: 46), basing his 'museumist' work not only around the collection, organization and display of objects, but also around research and science as the fundamental practices determining what constitutes knowledge at different stages in history. The natural history and university museum, as well as housing a collection of specimens, represents a collection of historical perspectives on knowledge production which Dion deems worth excavating in order to reveal the supposed 'truth' it attempts to convey about nature as a constructed fiction, as an anthropocentric narrative influenced by a plethora of discourses, ideologies and interests.

According to the *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy's* 'founding fable', Mark Dion, who was approached by the University of Manchester's AHRC Research Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies regarding a three-year residency and a possible collaboration with the university Museum, was so disappointed by what he found behind the door with the promising plate 'Surrealism Centre' – a prosaic breeze block room with ordinary desks and computers – that he decided on the spot to create an alternative version of a surrealist office in the Museum. Whilst flippancy and a certain delight in anecdotes may well be involved in Dion's readiness to circulate this tale (see for example Hammonds 2005: 5 or Dion, Dezeuze, Kelly and Lomas 2005: 4), it is per se highly telling of the way he debunks myths and unsettles fictions with elaborate counter-fictions, in this case playing on preconceptions of surrealism as an exotic, glamorous movement founded by a bunch of eccentric, slightly frivolous libertines. At one instance, Dion, with his distinctively deadpan humour, admits to have succumbed, consciously or not, to the very same myth: 'The Surrealists [...] led very exciting lives experimenting with psychoanalysis, sex, drugs – I mean it's everything you become an artist for' (Hammonds 2005: 5). The rift the *Bureau* founding narrative opens up between a dry, mundane academic setting and a presumably inspiring, alluring space also prompts us to reassess both the possibility and legitimacy of putting the works of precisely those artists and writers under rigid academic scrutiny who proclaimed the liberation of the unconscious, the free play of imagination and the reign of the marvellous. In a conversation with Surrealism Centre academics Anna Dezeuze, Julia Kelly and David Lomas, Dion calls attention to the fact that a strictly scientific enquiry about a phenomenon such as surrealism actually represents a contradiction in terms:

I mean you must find often yourselves in this situation, where you study in a very kind of rational, organised and academic way something very excessive and a bit (intentionally) on the crazy side and very politically and socially radical. To put that in a category where you are placing that under a microscope and dissecting it seems to be a process that is quite contrary to the original intentions. (Dion, Dezeuze, Kelly and Lomas 2005: 13)

The alleged clash between science and art, between meticulous research and free imagination Dion alludes to, lay at the very core of surrealism and is nicely captured in the legendary episode of the Mexican jumping bean that led to the break-up between André Breton and Roger Caillois shortly after the latter had published the essays *The Praying Mantis: From Biology to Psychoanalysis* and *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia* in the surrealist journal *Minotaure* in 1934 and 1935, both of which made a great impression on the surrealist group. Caillois, who, after his short-lived involvement with surrealism in the early 1930s, co-founded the College of Sociology with the 'dissident' surrealists Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris in 1937, went on to pursue a non-academic career in international bureaucracy with UNESCO and finally was appointed to the *Académie Française* near the end of his life, can be seen as a figure in whom poetic aspirations and scientific research combine, but he ultimately felt that key surrealist practices such as automatic writing were too literary, too random, and therefore was determined to provide the movement with a scientific foundation. Breton, at one of their meetings, refused to slice a jumping bean open because he was afraid that finding a larva inside would irretrievably destroy its mystery, whereas Caillois plead for dismantling it. In contrast to Breton, he promoted a form of the marvellous that does not fear knowledge but thrives on it (Caillois 2003: 84-5).

I will suggest in the following paper that Dion's *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy* provides an interstitial space situated between the poles of research and imagination embodied by Caillois and Breton, a space which engages with the institutions of academia and the university museum in a mutual symbiosis, but at the same time transcends them by drawing on their own, inherent discourses. Nicolas Bourriaud uses the concept of art as interstice in his seminal 1998 book *Esthétique relationnelle*. The notion of 'interstice' harkens back to Marx, who applies it to trading communities which, by ignoring the laws of profit, sidestep capitalist economy with means such as barter, merchandising or autarkic types of production. Bourriaud, in turn, characterizes the mostly process-based, interdisciplinary, performative, interactive and collaborative art practices emerging in the 1990s as 'social interstice' creating free areas withdrawn from social, economic and political systems imposed on us. Mark Dion, according to Bourriaud, appropriates discourses and professional protocols of natural science and archaeology in order to mimic the 'relational world' that these disciplines suppose, and to activate slippages between aesthetic and utilitarian functions (Bourriaud 2002: 35). While Bourriaud is concerned with the relationship between art and society as a whole, I would like to propose that his concept of relational aesthetics, particularly the idea of interstice, provides, alongside sociologist Michel de Certeau's 1974 study *L'Invention du quotidien* (translated in 1984 as *The Practice of Everyday Life*), a useful tool for analyzing Mark Dion's institutional interventions and for shedding a fresh light on the concept of 'institutional critique', which seems entangled in an intrinsic aporia: how much leeway do artists have to credibly expose frameworks and mechanisms of an institution whose integral part they are?

### **The installation as a closed box**

The final installation, part of the AHRC- and Art Council-funded Alchemy Project, which, running from 2003 to 2008, involves residencies of both international and local artists working with the Museum's collections, is the outcome of almost three years of on and off research and preparation. At a time when the whole Museum was being turned upside down, including a refurbishment and reorganization of the exhibition areas, Dion scoured the stores and collections, retrieving and rescuing objects and specimens which had slipped through the curators' net or were in danger of being discarded for good.

Entering the Museum and proceeding to the Special Projects space on the ground floor, the visitor inadvertently stumbles upon a glass-fronted, locked room in which objects and



**Fig. 1.** M. Dion, *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy*, 2005. Desk with books and stationery.

specimens such as a magic lantern, a stuffed duck-billed platypus, a mandrake root, plastic teaching models and a six-legged guinea pig are arranged in cabinets, on shelves and in drawers. Inconspicuously labelled, keeping us in the dark about its designation and purpose at first, the installation immediately provokes a plethora of associations: Is it an old curator's office? (A desk with stationery, books and folders as well as a conference table suggest an actual working space, **Fig. 1.**) Did we come across a storage room, allowing us to take a peek behind the scenes? Or did we discover a vestige of the Museum's past – sort of a time capsule speaking of earlier collection and display methods? The installation, indeed, manages to keep all these ideas effectively in play, for openness, ambiguity and doubt are the agents preventing the visitor from dully ruminating on predigested information.

As an alternative museum inside the Museum, the *Bureau* enters into a symbiotic relationship with the surrounding exhibition space, both commenting on it and contrasting it in several ways. First of all, it is significant that the *Bureau* is inaccessible. A pile of papers, loosely shuffled over the desk, and a lamp left switched on suggest that the scientist-collector-curator-scholar occupying the space has just temporarily left: we are tempted to twist the doorknob, pass the threshold and poke around. Yet, while various cabinets with closed drawers and pieces of furniture such as armchairs and a fireplace invite us to intrude, interact and make ourselves at home, our desire to inhabit the space is thoroughly frustrated. The door remains locked (**Fig. 2.**). Alongside making a special appointment with one of the curators in order to gain temporary access, the only possibilities to interact with the installation involve leaving a comment on the 'memos' provided and recording a message on the *Bureau* answering machine. As a result, visitors often express their disappointment of not getting inside, as well as their wish to spend time in the room. A sample of anonymous notes dropped through the *Bureau* door's letter slot in May 2006 reads: 'it's a beautiful day outside, but I would love nothing more than locking myself away in this Bureau', or 'I want to sit in this study, soak it up, explore'. By thus separating us from



**Fig. 2. M. Dion, *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy*, 2005. Locked door and reflecting glass panel.**

intellectually exciting space, a space that is really going to take me other places, a space that's going to be a key to a whole body of ideas' (Dion, Dezeuze, Kelly and Lomas 2005: 6). Rather than answering questions via labels, information sheets and lengthy wall panels, the display should, by letting the objects speak for themselves, encourage learning by stimulating thought-provoking questions: 'I'm interested in how knowledge is generated through objects, through things that I can be in a certain space with. So I find that that's part of my passion for museums: you get to see the thing' (Dion, Dezeuze, Kelly and Lomas 2005: 6). The emphasis here should be placed on *seeing* the object: contrary to installation art's common defining rationale of an engulfed viewer, of physical immersion and multi-sensory experience (Bishop 2005), the *Bureau* exclusively relies on the power of looking. French philosopher and poet Gaston Bachelard, whose psychoanalytical take on scientific rationalism inspired the surrealists and whose epistemological constructivism – the assumption that knowledge is not given but constructed (Bachelard 1947) – is in tune with Dion's art practice, examines the metaphors of the drawer, chest and wardrobe in relation to memory and imagination in his *Poetics of Space* (1957/1994) and comes to the conclusion that a closed, inaccessible space is more likely to keep the imagination alive than an open vessel revealing its secrets at once:

there will always be more things in a closed, than in an open, box. To verify images kills them, and it is always more enriching to *imagine* than to *experience*' (Bachelard 1994: 88).

Standing in front of the *Bureau* and attempting to catch a glimpse of the bizarre objects and specimens on display through reflecting glass panels feels like looking into a peep-box: our sense of wonder and excitement is tinged with burning curiosity as to what the compartments, drawers, and doors might be hiding.

the installation and leaving us with the options to look, imagine and think rather than to touch and to handle, the artist makes a powerful statement against interactive, hands-on science centres prevailing since the opening of San Francisco's *Exploratorium* in 1969 and, more generally, against over-didactic museum displays. In immediate vicinity of the *Bureau*, for instance, the Museum's 'Science for Life' gallery encourages the visitor to experience the workings of the human body by walking through a giant human cell magnified one million times, manipulating the joints on a full-size nickel-plated skeleton, arranging the heart, lungs and liver in a model torso and exploring the human brain through a transparent head. Dion's secluded installation seems to imply that such push-button frenzy might result in distracting the museum-goers' attention away from the objects; luring and lulling them with spectacle could dilute their respect and curiosity for the subject matter and ultimately prevent them from inquiring and learning.

According to Mark Dion, the ideal museum resembles a repository of the marvellous, a place stirring curiosity and imagination, 'a kind of visually and

### The installation as a contemporary *wunderkammer*

Alongside the theme of interactivity and accessibility, Mark Dion's *Bureau* is deeply concerned with taxonomy and classification, thereby reflecting on one of the museum's core tasks and competences. It is crucial in this respect that the installation not only evokes a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cabinet of curiosities, but also taps into the surrealists' fascination with alternative, idiosyncratic pre-Enlightenment classifications. A small apothecary's cabinet in the left corner is labelled according to the categories of the *International Exhibition of Surrealism* the group organized in Paris in 1938: 'Mathematical', 'Primitive', 'Natural', 'Interpreted', 'Irrational' and 'Incorporated Objects' are juxtaposed with 'Found Objects', 'Ready-made Objects', 'Fragments', 'Curious Collections' and 'Unexpected Juxtapositions'. Casually interspersed at the bottom left is an original, yellowed label reading 'N. America' (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3. M. Dion, *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy*, 2005. Six-legged guinea-pig, 'Borges' cabinet, box with discarded labels, key hanger**

Likewise, a surrealist spirit seems to impregnate the artist's selection criteria defining which objects were to be included in the installation. The curators were handed a 'Wish List' asking them to unearth objects, materials, specimens and apparatus 'which may make [them] smile, laugh, shake [their] head in shock and condemnation, or gasp'. One is reminded of a passage in André Breton's *Nadja* (1928/1964) where he evokes his trips to the flea market, 'on the lookout for these objects one cannot find anywhere else, outmoded, fragmented, unusable, almost incomprehensible, ultimately perverse in the way I appreciate it or like it' (Breton 1964: 62, my translation). Along these lines, a filing cabinet labelled with the categories of the *Chinese Encyclopaedia* Jorge Luis Borges quotes in his essay *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins* (1952) and which Michel Foucault mentions in *The Order of Things* (1966: 7), thoroughly subverts our expectations, for, instead of animals 'belonging to the emperor', 'mermaids', those 'drawn with a very fine camelhair brush' or those 'having just broken the water pitcher', the

museum environment would rather suggest Linnaean categories such as vertebrates, invertebrates, insects, mammals and reptiles. Post-Enlightenment separation between disciplines and categories has found its way into the Museum's 'conventional' exhibition areas after all, which are divided into the sections 'Natural World', displaying the university's collection of animals, plants, rocks/minerals and meteorites, and 'World Cultures', comprising the archaeological, anthropological and ethnographic collections.

Dion, applying a comprehensive, universal selection and display rationale instead, explicitly declares that he 'was drawn to things that were fragmented, to things that were anomalies, to curiosities' (Dion, Dezeuze, Kelly and Lomas 2005: 8), and indeed, the *Bureau* is highly reminiscent of a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century *wunderkammer* with its emphasis on extraordinary and bizarre objects, artefacts and specimens.

Cabinets of curiosities served various purposes – scholars used them as teaching aids, apothecaries as resources of research material and rulers as vectors of power and influence – but what at any rate emerges as one of their overriding themes is the encyclopaedic drive to create an image of the universe in miniature. Against the background of the supposed microcosm-macrocosm-correspondence, the juxtaposition of objects in a room or cabinet generated meaningful associations, the objects functioning as vessels in which diverse connotations converged. As the seventeenth-century Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher put it in his 1667 study on magnetism, *Magneticum Naturae Regnum*, 'the world was bound with secret knots' (Krümmel 2002: 41), and in this universal network, curiosities acted as points of intersection between different realms. Since it was furthermore believed that nature shines best through her cracks, the objects and specimens most highly treasured were those showing irregularities or crossing boundaries between different fields of knowledge and taxonomic categories: anomalies of nature, freaks and monsters, specimens resisting classification and objects oscillating between the spheres of art and nature as well as art and science.

By assembling a whole array of boundary-crossing, liminal objects, Mark Dion unmistakably situates his surrealist *Bureau* within this pre-Enlightenment context. The monstrous,



**Fig. 4. M. Dion, *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy*, 2005. Freak plant specimens.**

the grotesque and the hybrid seem to reign supreme. Quirks of nature such as a six-legged guinea-pig mounted on a purple, velvet-covered pedestal and placed under an enormous glass bell jar, or dried, framed freak plant specimens – a double-headed dandelion and a three-headed daffodil for instance (Fig. 4.) – rub shoulders with improperly stuffed or mounted fish and birds. A carton box on top of the 'Borges' filing cabinet, labelled 'Double Headed Calf July 1939', recalls the mounted specimen preserved in the teratological section of Tsar Peter I of Russia's *Kunstkamera* in St. Petersburg, while, in immediate vicinity, the yellow glass eyes of a defective stingray stare directly at the visitor, the pyramidal head of a faultily taxidermied sturgeon

sitting on a cabinet in the corner 'looks very much like a kebab' (Dion, Dezeuze, Kelly and Lomas 2005: 2), and a glass-fronted cabinet holds a stuffed bird with ludicrous eyes and a missing wing. Other borderline objects – objects at the periphery of both scientific rigour and good taste – include a series of urns made from tree galls sitting on a shelf above the fireplace (Fig. 5), fake archaeological material such as Egyptian figurines scattered around the *Bureau*, and hunting trophies of animals somewhat too harmless to be proudly mounted on a wall, such as a marten or a hyena.

Another tactic Dion employs in order to question classificatory schemes consists of interspersing rather bizarre mini-collections within the collection of the *Bureau* which is in turn situated within the overall collection of the Manchester Museum (a box of boxfish, a butterfly display case, a key hanger with orphaned keys, a box of discarded labels or a succession of casein buttons destroyed by rats in a Manchester warehouse, for example), thereby creating a *mise-en-abyme* through a series of collections reflecting upon each other. While the artist and his helpers may have been tempted to include items such as the box of boxfish primarily because of their striking appearance and out of pure enjoyment of puns, other mini-collections unmistakably point to the *wunderkammer*-surrealism trajectory the installation opens up. The butterfly case for instance is a visual reference to the vast collection of artworks, oceanographic objects, natural specimens and *objets trouvés* André Breton assembled in his studio in 42 rue Fontaine in Paris (Fig. 6). Dion cites Breton's flat as a direct influence on the *Bureau* programme and aesthetics as a whole (Hammonds 2005: 5), but the butterflies make for a particularly pertinent example of the artist's reactivation of the surrealists' scepticism towards Enlightenment classification.

One of the group's most effective strategies to upset bourgeois values, to undermine positivist thought and to challenge the rationalist ways in which knowledge had come to be organized and classified since the Enlightenment, consisted in drawing upon disciplines as diverse as physics, anthropology, alchemy and natural history, whilst impregnating them in



**Fig. 6. 'Breton Wall' at the Musée national d'art moderne, Pompidou Centre, Paris. One of Breton's butterfly and moth display cases hangs in the lower middle section of this preserved part of his collection.**



**Fig. 5. M. Dion, *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy*, 2005. Fireplace with urns made from tree galls.**

return with their own techniques centring around the unconscious and the marvellous. When Breton collects three delicate butterflies from North India and East Africa in a box layered with night blue velvet (fig. 3132 in Calmels Cohen 2003: 57), we search in vain for the naturalist's needle that adamantly pins the specimens down, nor for labels indicating Linnaean name and provenance. The insects, resembling white lace or embroidery, are showcased in a succession of frames that emphasises their aesthetic and poetic value over scientific interests of any kind. Yet at the same time, the sheer practice of displaying butterflies in a box subliminally denotes scientific endeavours, both quoting and overcoming them.



It is crucial to understand that this is a deeply subversive gesture towards contemporary science. What Breton brings back into perspective are the ties that exist between all phenomena and that turn nature into a vast network of references: in calling attention to the fact that the first butterfly in the box resembles a stone called 'paesine' which can be found in Tuscany in Italy (Calmels Cohen 2003: 57) and thus highlighting the similarity between the insect and a mineral, Breton evokes the Renaissance belief that all phenomena are interconnected. The butterfly looks like a stone, which, in return, is treasured for the natural drawings of landscapes, animals, plants and other phenomena engraved in its surface. Figured stones were given pride of place in cabinets of curiosities, for not only did they arouse wonder by blurring the line between art and nature, encouraging debates as to whether nature, the supreme artisan, could ever be surpassed by human artistry, but they also, and most importantly, embodied the cross-references between the three kingdoms of nature. For Breton, who is highly inspired by this sixteenth- and seventeenth-century tradition as well as by German Romantic *Naturphilosophie*, which was likewise based on the conviction that culture, history and nature blend into a single, harmonic unity, the world is indeed 'bound with secret knots.' He deplores the one-sidedness with which science, since the eighteenth century, has come to analyse nature, dissecting and classifying it instead of revealing affinities between the phenomena:

Don't you consider it unacceptable that man cares so little about butterflies? How can the description of a plant possibly subsist without that of a caterpillar or a larva that feeds on it more or less by natural affinity? This affinity the plant holds with such animal organisms, isn't it as significant as, say, its type of inflorescence? But the mania of classification tends to prevail over every veritable mode of knowledge. I'm afraid natural philosophy has made no progress since Hegel... (Breton 1952: 227, my translation)

By positioning his *Bureau* within this particular *wunderkammer*-surrealism genealogy and thus embedding it in a strand of science that is as much counter-positivist as it is counter-specialist, allowing imaginative leaps in order to open up revolutionary perspectives, and by juxtaposing it with the Museum, Dion encourages both staff and audience, the producers and recipients of knowledge by way of collection and classification of objects, to critically reconsider strategies and modes of meaning making that involve research and taxonomy.

The artist's book accompanying the installation (Dion 2005) proves just as radical. Other than providing an alternative array of museum departments - one wouldn't come across a department called 'Paradoxes and Numismatics' in a contemporary museum - it establishes a significant discordance between the illustrations and the descriptive captions. Opening a whole window on the surrealists' distrust of the supposedly 'natural' relationship between sign and signified, between word and image, captions such as 'IRON TONGS' for a 'Ball from [the] Stomach of a Cow' (Dion 2005: 35 and 99) or 'Rattle for calling Shango, the thunder god. OYO' for a French coin (Dion 2005: 84 and 102) profoundly subvert our preconceptions of taxonomic order.

Moreover, both a stuffed duck-billed platypus in a glass case and a babirusa skull displayed in a cabinet (Fig. 7.) allude to particular taxonomic quarrels: late eighteenth-century scientists, before classifying the



Fig. 7. M. Dion, *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy*, 2005. Cabinet with babirusa skull.

platypus as an egg-laying mammal, used to get thoroughly confounded by its reptilian and avian features, just as they hesitated for a long time to determine whether the babirusa belonged to the families of pigs or deer (Ritvo 1997).

The artist's presentation of bizarre, comical and boundary-blurring objects demonstrates that taxonomic nomenclatures, scientific categories and, ultimately, knowledge of any kind cannot be taken for granted, as the authoritative museum environment seems to imply, but that they used to and continue to be shaped by a centuries-long process peppered with uncertainties, struggles and debates. Dion relies upon the fact that visual constellations of the sort he creates in the *Bureau* trigger powerful associations capable of challenging reason and established cultural, scientific and museological categories:

I am excited by the tension between entertainment and education in the idea of the marvellous, especially in pre-Enlightenment collections like curiosity cabinets and *wunderkammers*. Along with visual games, logic tricks and optical recreations, these collections attempted to rationalize the irrational. They were neither dry didactics nor mindless spectacles. They tested reason the way storerooms, flea markets and dusty old museums challenge cultural categories and generate questions today. (Dion 1997: 17-18)

Taking a playful and humorous approach to classification and tapping into modes of thinking that elude post-Enlightenment taxonomy and specialization, he thoroughly upsets the categories in which the museum organizes knowledge about the world and thereby shapes our perception of it.

### The museum's 'unique selling propositions'

In contrast to the mostly political, almost harsh form of institutional critique put forward by artists from the late 1960s onwards, the way in which Mark Dion tackles the issues of interactivity and classification in his *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy* at the Manchester Museum exposes his relationship with the institution of the natural history and university museum as symbiotic and cooperative, rather than parasitic and aggressive. Instead of fighting for antipodal aims, artist and institution cooperated as partners on equal footing. According to Alchemy Curator Bryony Bond, the Museum curators' and scientists' reaction to the project was positive and enthusiastic throughout; no one felt criticized at all. Mark Dion's profound knowledge and passion about their work and each of their subject matters as well as their own openness to the artistic approach and their readiness for self-criticism – none of the Museum employees tends to put science on a pedestal – erodes the clear-cut polarity between the institution as expert and the artist as 'neutral' outsider: on the one hand the Museum appears as a polyvocal organism offering and encouraging different viewpoints, and on the other hand the artist's work on the project, which included researching, curating, lecturing and publishing, among other activities, closely resembles that of a museum curator, scientist and academic.

Dion has repeatedly emphasized that, for him, 'the dilettante is a much more interesting character historically than the expert' (Dion 1997: 29), and the *Bureau* seems to oscillate between the poles of these two historically distinct modes of accumulating, producing and distributing knowledge, drawing on both the figure of the sixteenth-century polymath who, striving for encyclopaedic knowledge, emerged as the product of a universalistic culture untouched by the development of separate disciplines, and the nineteenth-century specialist. Dion is reported by Bryony Bond to have worn a white lab coat, which now insinuatingly hangs in a corner of the *Bureau*, during the whole process of object accumulation in museum and university, thereby drawing attention to our readiness to put trust in the expert and to unquestioningly accept the 'truths' offered to us under the institutional seal of approval. He further explored this ambiguous stance between expert and dilettante by involving both specialists (the Museum staff, reaching from curators to technicians) and amateur volunteers (two art history and design students from Manchester Metropolitan University for example) in his project, who all collaborated in researching, choosing and presenting the objects. By re-enacting different guises of the expert as well as relying on both expert and dilettantist approaches, Dion seems to make a specific statement about interdisciplinarity. While his

installation and, in particular, the process leading to it, point to the fact that the curators' telling of history and conveying of knowledge through the selection and display of objects and through exhibition narrative should be seen as subjective and 'charismatic' rather than accurate and truthful, he at the same time calls for appreciation of their expertise, reiterating the appeal Sir William Henry Flower, curator of the Hunterian Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons, brought forward about 100 years earlier: 'What a museum really depends upon for its success and usefulness is not its building, not its cases, not even its specimens, but its curator. He and his staff are the life and soul of the institution, upon whom its whole value depends [...]' (Flower 1898: 12) Dion proposes a form of interdisciplinarity that, instead of promoting the emergence of blinkered 'jacks of all trades, masters of none', combines thorough expert knowledge with productive collaboration and exchange between faculties, departments and disciplines. Interestingly, his approach reverts back to Caillois's who, in the 1970s, returned to the theory of intersections between mythography, psychoanalysis and entomology put forward in his surrealist articles of the 1930s, expanding it to the concept of 'diagonal science', a vast cross-disciplinary field that, resting on *Naturphilosophie*, would give up specialization and fragmentation in favour of productive dialogue and exchange. According to Caillois,

...research itself suffers when each scientist, burrowing away in his own special tunnel as if he were some efficient and myopic mole, operates like a complete maverick, like a miner who is digging ever deeper, almost utterly unaware of the discoveries made by fellow workers in neighbouring galleries, and even more so of the results in distant quarries. What we need are relay stations at every level: anastomosis and coordination points, not only for assembling the spoils but above all for comparing different processes. (Caillois 2003: 344)

While Caillois adopts the image of the mole, Dion uses the animal metaphors of the fox and the hedgehog to further highlight the theme of interdisciplinarity: one of the 'papillons' visitors are invited to collect from a small cabinet in front of the *Bureau* confronts them with the question 'Are you a fox or a hedgehog?'. The papillons in general echo the surrealist papillons handed out to the public by members of the group shortly after its formation in the early 1920s – some of Dion's cards feature original surrealist aphorisms and quotes – but this particular one alludes to Sir Isaiah Berlin's book *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (1953), in which the political philosopher bases his analysis of key literary figures on the ancient Greek poet Archilochus's dictum 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing'. He places writers and thinkers, first and foremost Tolstoy, into two different camps: whereas hedgehogs tend to simplify complex matters by relating them to one single system, foxes pursue many divergent ends and refuse to integrate phenomena into one overriding scheme. Berlin suggests that Enlightenment specialization favoured hedgehogs, whereas Renaissance and Romanticism episteme brought forward universalistic foxes (Berlin 1967). I hope to have shown that Mark Dion's *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy* heavily depends on both modes of thinking, refusing to take sides. The installation provides an interstice between specialist and integrative modes of thinking, between expert and interdisciplinary knowledge, between scientific and idiosyncratic taxonomy, between 'regular' museum display and art installation, between scientific and imaginative ways of appropriating the world. Capitalising on the historical legacy of these dichotomies and suspending them at the same time, it sets out to offer an alternative space where the mind is free to question and query, to wonder and ponder: pre-Enlightenment and surrealist incidents of the marvellous are reactivated to create an interstitial 'world of constant metamorphoses and miracles where everything is always possible' (Caillois 2003: 349).

Michel de Certeau's interdisciplinary study *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1974/1984), in which he draws on different fields and disciplines such as sociology, ethnology and psychoanalysis in order to examine tactics by which individuals as consumers might be able to outwit productivist, institutional power structures imposed upon them in everyday life, proves a useful tool for analysing the relationship between artist and institution. Examining the indigenous Indian cultures' ruses of transforming and subverting the Spanish colonists' system of order from within, de Certeau argues that the Indians 'remained other within the system which

they assimilated and which assimilated them externally', and that '[t]hey diverted it without leaving it'. (de Certeau 1984: 31-2) Applied to the artist and the institution of the museum, this means that the artist uses both his outsider perspective, his 'remaining other' within the institution, and his insider knowledge, to challenge, comment on and transform the museum's collection, display and education strategies in an astute and artful, but altogether sympathetic way. Just as games and tales, according to de Certeau, 'offer both an inventory and a repertory of combinations' to act 'in a space outside of and isolated from daily competition, that of the past, the marvellous, the original', the *Bureau*, by forwarding 'a return of the ethical, of pleasure and of invention within the scientific institution', subtly manipulates and diverts the museum's power and order of knowledge (de Certeau 1984: 23 and 28).

In this process, instead of employing 'strategies of oppositionality [...] which no longer have effective currency' because they 'became absorbed into the very system they sought to critique' (Fisher 2000: 7), the artist brings the museum's own history and ancestry back into play in order to reconfigure its present situation. His use of the museum's *wunderkammer* legacy, with a detour via surrealism, turns out a particularly apt tool for undermining the binary logic upon which institutional discourse is based and in which earlier forms of institutional critique got entrapped: Peter Mason, in an article on postmodern approaches to opposing the restrictions of Enlightenment reason, argues that '[t]he poetics [and politics] of the cabinet of curiosities offer a form of resistance to the totalising ambitions of reason, a place where the human mind can play instead of working' (Mason 2000, 28). Mark Dion, by activating our imagination through stimulating both our sense of vision and our sense of wonder, by proposing alternative principles of classification based on the museum's past and by drawing on the museum staff's competence, using them as a prime knowledgebase, gently and playfully reminds us that the museum, in order to remain relevant nowadays, must at any cost avoid undervaluing its core competences, which are at the same time its 'unique selling propositions': on the one hand the objects' quality as 'nodes at which matter and meaning intersect' (Daston 2004: 16), their concreteness, historicity and ability to trigger and embody stories, thoughts and emotions, and on the other hand the employees' specialist expertise.

Received 26<sup>th</sup> July 2006

Finally accepted 4<sup>th</sup> March 2007

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Anna Dezeuze and Bryony Bond for sharing their thoughts on the installation. All photos by Marion Endt and taken with permission.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The term 'institutional critique' was coined by critic Benjamin Buchloh (1990). Recent articles on and by artists engaging in institutional critique from the late 1960s onwards include Ward 1995, Fraser 2005, Beech 2006, Suchin 2006 and Le Feuvre 2006.
- <sup>2</sup> Dion here slightly modifies a passage from Luis Buñuel's autobiography *My Last Breath*, where the Spanish film maker discusses the destructive force emanating from the surrealist movement: 'The idea of burning down a museum, for instance, has always seemed more enticing than the opening of a cultural center or the inauguration of a new hospital.' (Buñuel 1994: 107).

### References

- Bachelard, G. (1947) *La Formation de l'esprit scientifique: contribution à une psychanalyse de la connaissance objective*, Paris: Vrin.
- Bachelard, G. (1994) *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, Boston: Beacon Press.
- Beech, D. (2006) 'Institutionalisation for All', *Art Monthly*, 294, March, 7-10.

- Berlin, I. (1967) *The Hedgehog and the Fox: Essay on Tolstoy's View on History*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Bishop, C. (2005) *Installation Art: A Critical History*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Bourriaud, N. (2002) *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, Dijon: Presses du reel.
- Breton, A. (1952) *Entretiens 1913-1952*, avec André Parinaud, Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
- Breton, A. (1964) *Nadja*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Buchloh, B. (1990) 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October*, 55, 105-43.
- Buñuel, L. (1994) *My Last Breath*, trans. Abigail Israel, London: Vintage.
- Caillois, R. (2003) *The Edge of Surrealism. A Roger Caillois Reader*, ed. and with an introduction by Claudine Frank, trans. Claudine Frank and Camille Naish, Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Calmels Cohen (2003) *André Breton – 42, rue Fontaine: numismatique, arts populaires*, auction cat., Paris, Drouot-Richelieu, 14 April 2003, Paris: A. Weil and H.-C. Randier.
- Certeau, M. de (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Coles, A. (1999) 'Fieldwork and the Natural History Museum. Mark Dion Interview', in A. Coles (ed.), *The Optic of Walter Benjamin*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 38-55.
- Daston, L. (2004) 'Introduction: Speechless', in L. Daston (ed.), *Things That Talk. Object Lessons from Art and Science*, New York: Zone Books, 9-24.
- Dion, M. (1997) 'Miwon Kwon in Conversation with Mark Dion', in L.G. Corrin, M. Kwon and N. Bryson, *Mark Dion*, London: Phaidon, 7-33.
- Dion, M. (2005) *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy*, London: Book Works.
- Dion, M., Dezeuze, A., Kelly, J. and Lomas, D. (2005) 'Mark Dion in Conversation with Anna Dezeuze, Julia Kelly and David Lomas', *Papers of Surrealism*, 4, 1-14.  
<[www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/publications/papers/journal4/index.htm](http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/publications/papers/journal4/index.htm)>
- Fisher, J. (2000) 'Introduction', in J. Fisher (ed.), *re-verberations. Tactics of Resistance, Forms of Agency in Trans/cultural Practices*, Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Editions, 7-17.
- Flower, W. H. (1898) *Essays on Museums and Other Subjects Connected with Natural History*, London: Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. (1966) *Les Mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Fraser, A. (2005) 'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', *Artforum*, September, 278-83.

Hammonds, K. (2005) 'American Naturalist. Kit Hammonds in Conversation with Mark Dion', in *Untitled*, 34, spring, 4-9.

King, L. and Marstine, J. (2006) 'The University Museum and Gallery: A Site for Institutional Critique and a Focus of the Curriculum', in J. Marstine (ed.), *New Museum Theory and Practice. An Introduction*, Malden: Blackwell, 266-91.

Krümmel, C. (2002) *The Museum of Jurassic Technology. Das Museum Kircherianum. Die Welt besteht aus geheimen Verknüpfungen. The Museum Kircherianum. The World is Bound with Secret Knots*, Hagen: Neuer Folkwang Verlag im Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum.

Le Feuvre, L. (2006) 'The Institution Within', *Art Monthly*, 297, June, 7-10.

Lomas, D. (2005) 'Mark Dion's Surrealist Legacy'.  
<[http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/dion\\_article.pdf](http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/dion_article.pdf)>

Mason, P. (2000) 'The Song of the Sloth', in J. Fisher (ed.), *re-verberations. Tactics of Resistance, Forms of Agency in Trans/cultural Practices*, Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Editions, 20-31.

McShine, K. (1999) *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, exh. cat., New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

O'Doherty, B. (1986) *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

Ritvo, H. (1997) *The Platypus and the Mermaid and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination*, London and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Ross, T. (2006) 'Aesthetic autonomy and interdisciplinarity: a response to Nicolas Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics"', *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 5 (3) 167-181.

Suchin, P. (2006) 'On Institutionalisation. Rebel without Recourse', *Art Monthly*, 295, April, 38.

Ward, F. (1995) 'The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity', *October*, 73, 71-89.

## Address

University of Manchester  
School of Arts, Histories and Cultures  
Humanities Bridgeford Street  
Oxford Road  
Manchester M13 9PL  
e-mail [marion.endt@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk](mailto:marion.endt@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk)

\***Marion Endt** is currently three years into her PhD in Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Manchester. Her research on the legacies of cabinets of curiosities in Surrealism and contemporary art / the contemporary museum is supervised by Dr Julia Kelly and Dr David Lomas at the AHRC Research Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies.