Artists-as-Curators in Museums: Observations on Contemporary Wunderkammern

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ARTISTS-AS-CURATORS IN MUSEUMS: OBSERVATIONS ON CONTEMPORARY WUNDERKAMMERN

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Abstract

Since the mid-1980s, the new, socially responsive role that museums have assumed and the critically engaged positions of chief curators and directors have led to a variety of practices that attempt to break the old canon of exhibitions, to promote new and interactive ways of communicating their collections to the public and to achieve the much-desired engagement with museum objects. In this framework, artists are often invited by art and other museums (historical, archeological, ethnographic, etc.) to display or to produce their work as artists-in-residence, creating different contexts for existing exhibitions. But what happens when contemporary artists are called to “re-organize” parts of a museum’s permanent collection, commenting in parallel on the institution’s own history and function? In our paper, we discuss curatorial projects undertaken by artists that critically assess the museum’s historical role, its epistemological background and its power to legitimize culture. Artistic installations and redisplays of historical collections by artists become the focus of our inquiry, especially in the now fashionable display format of the Renaissance Wunderkammer. Our aim is to examine how artistic knowledge and practice can illuminate aspects of art-historical and museological practices, aspects which are rendered invisible when working separately in our academic fields.

Keywords: curatorship and art practices; museum’s epistemology; artists-as-curators; Wunderkammer

If we are now living in “Liquid Times” as Zygmunt Bauman proposed (2000), then what are the role and the raison d’être of museums? How can these powerful by-products of an outdated modernity attract new audiences, offer new narratives using aging collections and respond to current sensitivities? How do they manage to survive as they try to come to terms with current institutional criticism of their authority and social utility?

In this paper we discuss one such “survival strategy,” namely the curatorial projects undertaken by artists that critically assess the museum’s historical role, its epistemological background and its power to legitimize culture. Our thoughts stemmed from museums’ and artists’ apparent fascination with a rather unexpected historicism, which is characterized by several contemporary artworks presented, in particular in museums that are not directly devoted to art. Artistic installations and new exhibitions of historical collections put on by artists become the focus of our inquiry, especially in the now fashionable display format of the Renaissance Wunderkammer.¹

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THE RETURN (?) OF AN OLD CANON

Artists have always cared about the display of their art. Within the context of modernity, the art exhibition was raised to unprecedented levels of importance for the artist and the art work. A late arrival in the world of art, the curator as an autonomous **auteur** assumed a creative role equal to that of the artist. What would now distinguish the artist from the curator? In the 1960s and 1970s, the “institutional critique” wave challenged the recently formed “art world.” Stereotypes were questioned, ways of thinking challenged and roles exchanged. Many artists chose to present their critique by employing the same tools curators used. Some artists preferred to emphasize the procedure of selecting the objects to be displayed and the exhibition narrative, and they sought to question the limits of both the art object and its institutions. Marcel Duchamp is considered the patriarch of this genre, as he “turned the act of choosing into a new paradigm of creativity” (Filipovic 2014:159-160). Other artists adopted the curatorial procedure and used objects which already belonged to collections (not any ready-mades) to question the limits of museum display methods and of curatorial practice (Putnam 2009).

The first, old-fashioned and rather taxonomic observation that an art historian would make is that there are more examples of artists acting as guest curators – that is, curating exhibitions occasionally – than of artists for whom the curatorial procedure is integral to their art practice. Mark Dion is one example of the latter. He is the artist **par excellence** working within the limits of curatorship and artistic practice. He simulates archeological practices, mines museum and university collections and directs his projects as curator. His final works are presented as cabinets of curiosities, both in form and in content. This approach makes Dion’s work completely site-specific, a fact that renders the artist totally dependent upon museum institutions and residency programs.

Since the 1990s, Dion has held more than a hundred museum and gallery exhibitions (Corrin, Kwon and Bryson 1997; Dion 2001, 2003a, b; Kamps and Rugoff 2000; Klein 2003). In 1999-2000, he performed the “Tate Thames Dig” as part of the pre-opening program of the Tate Modern, London (Figure 1). The artist and numerous volunteers performed a survey along the banks of the Thames at Bankside. The final piece was a double-sided display cabinet which allowed visitors to see, handle and interpret the objects “discovered” on the Thames foreshore, a staged environment that “engaged the viewer in phenomenal and cognitive fields of perception” (Blazwick 2001:103). In 2001, for his **Cabinet of Curiosities** at the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Dion mined the university’s various collections with students and staff to present his idea of the “university as installation” (Sheehy 2006). Once again, it was an ambitious project that involved numerous students as researchers and curators, vast and heterogeneous research collections and extended documentation processes. His contribution to **dOCUMENTA 13** (2012) was created in connection to the Ottoneum² (Figure 2). Dion was commissioned to design a permanent new display for the Schildbach Xylotheque, a “wood library,” which is a unique object in the museum collection. In the eighteenth century (1771-1779), Carl Schildbach collected 530 “books” made from tree samples and arranged them encyclopedically (Figure 3). Dion’s chamber catalogues the collection, placing

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**Figure 1.** Mark Dion, Tate Thames Dig, 1999. Wooden cabinet, porcelain, earthenware, metal, animal bones, glass and two maps. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, 2015.
each sample in a panel related to its continent of origin. The artist added six new “books” to the collection. The first one was made out of one of Beuys’ “7 000 Oaks” (first planted in 1982 for *dOCUMENTA 7*), thus symbolically completing the encyclopædic endeavor that began some 200 years ago. Inserted into the reverse of the panels are five images made of wood, representing the five continents (Brindley 2012). For the *Lost Museum* at the Jenks Museum of Natural History and Anthropology at Brown University in 2014–2015, Dion included the figure of the collector in his installation. The final work was a resurrection of a lost museum collection in a cabinet-of-curiosities manner (Figures 4–5). The Jenks Museum was founded in 1871 by John Whipple Potter Jenks (1819–1894), taxidermist and naturalist. After his death in 1894, the museum fell into disarray and its collection was for the most part discarded in 1945. Dion, together with numerous other artists, and with help from students and faculty at Brown University, recreated Jenks’ office, presented the surviving part of the museum’s collection and organized an installation that recreated objects now gone from the collection (Anderson 2014; Fountain 2014). The exhibition was viewed as a “reminder of a bygone era when a much different kind of institution offered a quiet, in-depth study” (Fountain 2014).
In Dion’s projects, most museum practices are followed: collecting objects, registering them in a record, setting a museological framework, making decisions about the objects that will be displayed, producing designs and staging the exhibition. There is a catalogue with texts theorizing about the display and illustrated with pictures of the particular event that follows and wraps up the whole endeavor. As in everyday museum practice, Dion’s projects are inevitably collective: many professionals and volunteers collaborate on the necessary exhibition procedures, and engage in the team conversations and debates that form part of the final project. The museum as a modern institution thus becomes the main medium (cf. Putnam 2009) – or a post-medium – of his works. No matter how conceptual Dion’s projects may be, the display format he chooses is that of the Wunderkammer. Particularly in the Lost Museum, the very core of the project was to reproduce the lost feeling of contemplation experienced in past forms of exhibitions, which is not cultivated in modern natural history museums.

Like many other artists engaged in museum “mining” projects, Dion is highly educated in academic environments. He holds a BFA and an honorary doctorate from the University of Hartford, Connecticut, and it is debatable whether his theoretical orientation or his readings diverge significantly from those of art critics or other professionals at the museums where he has worked. Yet despite such academic backgrounds, artists are still considered to have a “different” approach to curatorial issues. This is evident in projects such as the Artist’s Choice, “an ongoing series in which a contemporary artist is asked to create an exhibition from The Museum of Modern Art’s [NY] vast collection” (Hoptman 2012). Even conceptual and appropriation artists or art activists have not dissociated themselves from the modernist conception of the auteur as the genius producer of masterpieces, worthy of being collected or displayed in museums, the traditional temples of art.

What makes their choices more free or “different” than those made by curators? Could it be that their education has prepared them to produce innovative, personalized and “authentic” works? That their œuvre should have a unique “signature”? Could it be that Dion’s projects constitute an effort to discuss or criticize the contemporary deadlock of the artist’s existence and role in the market and society? Or are his questions mainly about contemporary museum practices? Regardless of these hypotheses, artists are not scientists, therefore they are not expected to act with precision and methodological strictness. Although their theoretical background is more solid than earlier in the twentieth century, their knowledge remains tacit, while their practices and output differ from what is thought of as a scientific procedure (Elkins 2012:5-5, 39-48). According to Frances Whitehead, artists are “creative, in process problem solving and ongoing processes, [they] compose and perform, initiate and carry-thru, design and execute. […] [They] are trained to initiate, re-direct the brief, and consider their intentionality” (Whitehead 2006). What makes their choices appealing to museums, curators, exhibition designers and perhaps the public is exactly the arbitrary nature of creativity, performativity and problem-solving capacity, as well as their (perceived) special role in society. The romantic myth of the artist as a person who possesses special abilities, who is an extraordinarily sensitive human being and a creative genius, still lives on. It is perhaps these and similar features that make artists appear attractive not only to the ‘creative industry,’ but also to research institutions, government centres, etc. However, the limits between artists’ and curators’ choices are, of course, blurred and open to discussion. Curators and artists populate the same modern, liquid topos. And the same is true about their audiences. After all, a clear-cut taxonomic distinction between artistic and curatorial practices would undermine the epistemologies of our own art world.

In current exhibition design, especially in museums other than art museums, a similar tendency to create cabinet-of-curiosity-like exhibitions can be observed. Celebrated in recent research as an ancestor to the modern museum, the Wunderkammer has “acquired the status of a universally admired role model” which “embodies a playful space of investigation and interaction” between objects and viewers (Collet 2014:47). In fact, after the turn of the millennium, the Wunderkammer way of exhibiting became a new fashion trend for curators of non-art museums, a beloved way to re-present or invigorate collections that
might seem out-of-date. From museum stores rendered visible to the public to temporary exhibitions, museum curators and exhibition designers often prefer the aesthetic of artifactual density, unusual juxtapositions, and a display system that presents metaphors and allegorical themes visually. Could the reason for this “revival” be that the contemporary Wunderkammer qualities correspond to the current multiplicity and perplexity of representations, which museologists, curators and artists-as-curators have to manage? Or is it perhaps that ideas about the history of exhibitions and the role of museums in Western culture are made more visible by the high-tech and spectacular staging of current cabinets?

Sir Henry Solomon Wellcome (1853–1936) was a passionate collector, fascinated by the “art and science of healing throughout the ages” (Bailey 2008). By the time of his death, he owned a huge collection of books and objects related to the history of medicine and a wide range of other artifacts vaguely or explicitly connected to the body, such as weapons, instruments of torture, sex aids, samples of hair of various historical figures, etc. The collection was stored for the better part of the twentieth century, as the building bought to house it was destroyed during World War II and because during the post-war years the emphasis shifted from the collector’s objects to his library. In 2003, the exhibition Medicine Man: The forgotten museum of Henry Wellcome at the British Museum celebrated the 150th anniversary of the collector’s birth, presenting some 700 items from the original collection. In 2007, this exhibition was permanently housed at the restored Wellcome Building in London, offering “a manifestation of Wellcome’s vision and a glimpse of the vastness of his collection” (Bailey 2008). The exhibition is organized by type or theme in cellular boxes in the style of a Wunderkammer (Figures 6–7): the objects selected do not illustrate a strict scientific history of medicine, nor do they play a solely didactic role in medical terms. Wellcome’s attitude for collecting anything that seemed relevant to the body is also illustrated. This type of presentation not only relates to the history of the collection itself, but also to the history of exhibiting medical collections in general. It allows a degree of free associations on behalf of the viewer and enables curators to tell an array of stories.

In 2010, the Wet Collections of the Museum für Naturkunde (Natural History Museum), Berlin, were re-staged in the restored East Wing of the building. The collections comprise one million zoological specimens, preserved in 276,000 vials full of ethanol (Glazebrook 2011). These numbers alone would...
make Damien Hirst jealous, let alone the fact that part of this collection is presented as an art installation to the public (Figure 8). The transparent vases, arranged in glass and metal constructions in a high-tech environment, are cleverly juxtaposed with light sources. They certainly follow the aesthetic principles of contemporary art and comply with the most recent, high museographic and scientific standards (Figure 9). The result looks like a contemporary Wunderkammer of significant scientific and cultural value. In addition, as long as the exhibit can easily be perceived as an art installation, it might open up more possibilities for visitors to become involved with the exhibits in a playful manner.

The temporary exhibition WeltWissen–World Knowledge was staged at the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, in 2010-11. It was the first major exhibition after the city’s reunification to celebrate Berlin’s cultural and scientific history. It was therefore dedicated to various anniversaries: the 200 years of the Humboldt-Universität, the 300 years of the Charité, the 300 years since the first statute and first publication by the
Berlin-Bradenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, the 100 years of the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft and the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaften and the 300th birthday of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. All these institutions collaborated to organize the exhibition as a unique joint project (Hennig and Andraschke 2010). The objects on display, which all belonged to university collections and archives of Berlin, represented various fields of scientific research, and their manner of exhibition intended to illustrate different taxonomic views and methodological approaches. At the core of the exhibition, the “Lichthof-Installation” (Figures 10-11) was created: an out-of-proportion Wunderkammer, a huge, site-specific construction in the rotunda of the Martin-Gropius-Bau, the result of teamwork between Mark Dion, the “WeltWissen” team and the designer of spaces | teamstratenwerth. The objects on display were chosen following “less strict criteria” than those followed for other parts of the exhibition (Meyer 2010: 84). Not accidentally, the selection was made by Mark Dion, the team’s artist (Meyer 2010:84; te Heesen 2010: 91). Visitors first encountered a spectacular light show at the back of the installation and had to walk to the front to discover the exhibits and get a view of the whole.

Objects placed on higher shelves could be examined with media-assisted binoculars. Dion organized objects in this contemporary Wunderkammer following the old-fashioned, modern scientific taxonomy: Naturalia (“Natural Sciences” in Dion’s words: geology, paleontology, botany, zoology, etc.), Humania (“Humankind”: physical anthropology, anatomy, etc.), Artificialia (“Noösphere”: archeology, history, law, philosophy, etc.) (te Heesen 2010: 92-93). The “Lichthof” was conceived as “a prologue and an epilogue to the exhibition” (Meyer 2010:84). It offered a vivid, visual representation of the world of sciences and the very concept of world knowledge, and it created a strong impression through its massive dimensions, number of accumulated objects, ample free space, stage design and lighting. It functioned as an art installation per se, rather than an exhibition strategy of a science museum. It actually promoted the generation of real life experiences, rather than the acquisition of knowledge. After all, is it not a similar amazement at the world, its phenomena and the infinity of facts, that leads scientists to study, research and produce ideas? As was explicitly mentioned in the catalogue, “[…] art [often] reflects the core of science and its limits” (Meyer 2010:84).

Beginning with the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris and its Grande Galerie de l'Évolution that reopened in 1994 (a central cultural project of the François Mitterrand presidency), many natural history museums in Europe have favored the large scale Wunderkammern as an attention-getting spectacle on their premises. Other museums have followed suit. In particular, new displays of old European ethnographic museums (now labeled “world museums”) seem to capitalize on the cabinet-like mode of exhibiting their collections. One such example is Horst Bredekamp’s proposal for the Humboldt-Forum in Berlin, one of the largest contemporary German museum projects. It is an institution that will accumulate Berlin’s former colonial collections (the former Museum für Völkerkunde and the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst) and exhibit them at the Stadtschloss. The core of this exhibition will be a “recreated Kunstkammer,” proposed as a space “of wonder and gazing” which is hoped to replace the display of colonial booty with “commemorative collecting” (Fuhr 2009). The Parisian Musée du Quai Branly organized the exhibition of its collection along similar lines, without however stating a clear association with the Wunderkammer (Collet 2014:66-67).

WHY ARE MUSEUMS AND ARTISTS WORKING AS CURATORS SO FASCINATED WITH WUNDERKAMMERN TODAY?

In “liquid” modernity, none of the mid-twentieth century certainties exist. As key conceptual divides (nature/society, local/global, peace/war) become negotiable, hybrid realities become au courant. If the interpretation of objects and collections by museum professionals is no longer valid or, in the best case, constitutes only one possible interpretative rationale among many, then a new space is created for the apparently personal, special and often inspiring narratives that contemporary artists offer through their curatorial projects and associated displayed artworks (Keene 2006:185-98; Macdonald 2003; Solomon 2011:105-110; Walsh 1992). The cabinet of curiosities represents a totally different set of organizational principles than the Enlightenment’s formal taxonomies and codified relationships between objects, species and specimens. As a place for conversation, exchange, and sharing of knowledge among a limited number of people who gathered there, the cabinet was based on metaphor, allegory and various, not always rational (by modern standards) associations between its objects, making the production of meaning more or less a poetic act (Hooper-Greenhill 1992:78-104).

Perhaps these are the values that strike contemporary practitioners as engaging, intriguing and appropriate for today’s audiences. For them, as for artists, it seems time not only to get rid of strict taxonomies, but also to try to reconnect the human to the natural. Eleni Kamma, a Greek artist who lives and works in Belgium and the Netherlands, recently presented her Wunderkammer for the group art exhibition Terrapolis, in Athens, Greece. In the gardens of the École Française d’Athènes, a respectful cultural institution with a long history of promoting knowledge of the past, Kamma revealed connections between juxtaposed botanical specimens, tools, vessels, and human and natural objects from former colonies, and she questioned established epistemologies such as that of the anthropological discipline (Figure 12). The whole installation and its curatorial work ended up being an investigation of the social, historical and cultural importance of things.

Beatrice von Bismarck describes curating as “a process of bringing together previously unconnected things, people, spaces and discourses” (Reichert 2011). If this is true, then the contemporary cabinet allows freer associations with displayed objects than any modernist, purified, scientific perception of exhibitions has ever been able to (Bann 2003, 2006; Ulmann 2010). Actually, metaphor and imitation also become key tools in selecting objects for display, as is the case of Wunderkammer-like displays curated by art historians (Lasser 2015). As there is no fixed meaning in this kind of installation, it is easier to demonstrate that there are multiple – in fact, infinite – readings possible for viewers. By its very conception, the contemporary cabinet proclaims that any classification system or system of description or representation is partial, flawed and biased.
Because they present an alternative history of exhibited objects (Lasser 2015:228), contemporary cabinets encourage not only a different approach to knowledge, but also an interdisciplinary – if not participatory – way of learning. This mixing of disciplines is particularly relevant to projects conducted in university museums and to miscellaneous collections and donations, which may adopt didactic approaches to both the meaning of objects and the role of key social institutions, museums and universities included. As King and Marstine have shown, such curatorial projects undertaken together with staff and students at university collections are capable of producing radical critical thinking, comparative epistemologies and new trends in museum theory. They introduce new values in art and new elements in the way museums produce meanings, especially when artists collaborate with non-art museums (King and Marstine 2005: 266-291).
In a way, the current tendency of cabinets to reimagine the organization of knowledge can be linked to the Internet experience. As they bring together objects from history, music, art, design, literature, biology, geology and other disciplines, they reenact a universal world of knowledge as conceived prior to its division into current disciplinary categories. In parallel, the Internet is a domain in which disparate representations and knowledge from every discipline come together. Users are free to make uninhibited choices and create personal taxonomies. The web transforms visitors into collectors of pictures, texts, videos, etc., selected with or without scientific criteria and classified in rational, symbolic or simply idiosyncratic ways. Almost all of us have our own cabinet of curiosities in our personal computers, visited and shared at will. Navigating in these “collections” is usually rhizomatic, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s term (1987), rather than chronological. It is heterogeneous and not necessarily hierarchical. It lasts from seconds to hours and produces thoughts, feelings and knowledge. This fact renders the experience of contemporary cabinet-like exhibitions even easier to access and similar to everyday life experience.

The Internet also allows artists to create museums, cabinets, collections and exhibitions online and to distribute them effortlessly, outside the market system (with which they have had a love-hate relationship throughout modernity). In some cases, such digital Wunderkammern also involve the development of new audiences by allowing personal choices concerning the inclusion of specific objects into invented collections, choices that represent each individual who gets involved in the visual production of a flexible and personal display system. This is the case of the Wunderkammer digital experiment proposed by Lisa Meyer and Chris Creed to the British Library Labs in 2014. The experiment involved the development of a digital prototype with which members of the audience could recontextualize the huge digitized collections of the British Library. In a Wunderkammer of their own creation, virtual visitors could display selected objects and images drawn from a database, thus subverting the authority of the curator and of the artist-curator as well.

CONCLUSIONS

Whether as a temporary installation or as an exhibition pattern, museums, artists and curators are turning to the Wunderkammer as an artistic/museological theme, and thereby inviting fascination with the allegorical and the irrational, reconnecting the human with the natural, and allowing historicist concepts to re-enter the scene. Through the re-emergence of cabinets we can legitimately forget, at least for a brief time, the Enlightenment “order of things,” the education of nation-state citizens and the visual arrangement of “eloquent” object taxonomies.

These “museums within museums” probably reveal the end of a discussion that was powerful for so long in New Museology and critical art theory, that of the much debated “crisis of representation” (representation of anything – scenes, disciplinary fields, nations, tendencies or discourses). Curating cabinet-like displays makes us think of postmodern curating as post-representational, a process that, as Nora Sternfeld recently stated, turns “the museum into a public space where things are ‘taking place’ rather than ‘being shown’” (Sternfeld 2013).

The contemporary Wunderkammer is also a useful tool in the hands of museum practitioners because it shifts the emphasis from texts to objects. Within the modernist context of knowledge production, objects were seen as evidence of solid academic results usually disseminated through publications. When exhibited, they needed long explanatory texts serving as mediators between them and the viewers. Contemporary cabinets allow objects to be seen as structures of artefacts open to any interpretation, thus possibly rewriting the history of material culture (cf. Lasser 2015). In this way, they follow the conceptual ideal of modernist art creation while including the postmodernist quest for “tagging,” that is, the possibility not only to attach other exhibits to the object-exhibits but also to put personal “tags” on them, thus resisting the dominant museum view (Solomon 2011:108).
Evidently, such curatorial projects create two distinct levels of object hierarchies. The first connotes the permanent collection which is securely “protected” and “defended against audacious, subjective or simply non-scientific uses” (before or after the artist’s intervention), through inventories, publications, labels and rather predictable displays. The second depends directly on the artist’s work, which we still expect to be special, innovative, provocative and (fortunately, we would say) temporary. This temporal dualism is safe enough not to invalidate (literally deconstruct) the age-long museum tradition of disciplinary authority, in which museums offer the public some innovative shows in order to catch up with current trends in curating and/or in cultural theory. Museums present themselves as discursive fields where art and curatorial practices overlap, in a democratic and politically correct manner in an age of instability and change. Experiment and playfulness, two basic aspects of being in postmodernity, can be dealt with, even superficially. As Colleen Sheehy, co-curator of Mark Dion’s Cabinet of Curiosities said in 2001: “Through an archaic style of museum display we achieved something that museums today are struggling to reinvent, suggesting (ironically) the possibility of the cabinet of wonder as an important new model for museum exhibitions” (Sheehy 2006:25–26).

More than anything else, these “ancestral wonders” reveal the heterotopic and referential dimension of the museum as “a space of difference” (Lord 2006:1–14; Solomon 2011). This is the difference between objects and their meanings – the ideas and associations that are activated not only by the accumulation of disparate things and times and divergent interpretations by scholars and specialists, but also by inspirational uses of objects made by artists-curators, by participant artists and, of course, by visitors. Having consciously embodied the role of a rational critic of a universal and “true” order of things, contemporary Wunderkammern render the conceptual links between exhibits and represented ideas more obvious than ever. Postmodern or liquid modern, with or without a future, museums do, indeed, have an interesting present.

NOTES
1 The term is used here interchangeably with the collocation cabinet of curiosities. Wunderkammer is the singular form of the word, and Wunderkammern the plural.
2 The Ottoneum is a seventeenth-century building, considered the first theater in Germany. It now serves as Kassel’s Museum of Natural History.
4 The Technische Universität Berlin, the Freie Universität, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and the Deutsches Museum, Munich, were involved as partners.
5 The exhibition Terrapolis was the fruit of collaboration between the École Française d’Athènes, the NEON Organization for Contemporary Art, Athens, Greece, and the Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK. It was staged at the gardens of the École and was curated by Iwona Blazwick, Director of the Whitechapel Gallery. It was held from May 27 to July 26, 2015.
6 Curator Ethan Lasser confronts the displays of two similar Staffordshire teapots at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the Milwaukee Art Museum (2015). The first one evokes traditional taxonomic displays based on Linnaean structures of knowledge, while the second one employs the Wunderkammer visual principles by mixing teapots and fossils, thus implying the interconnection of the natural and the human and the role of imitation of nature in the production of such artifacts in the eighteenth century.
7 See the magazine Cabinet, “designed to encourage a new culture of curiosity, one that forms the basis both for an ethical engagement with the world as it is and for imagining how it might be otherwise” http://cabinetmagazine.org/information/index.php (accessed October 11, 2015).
8 The Orchard in NY (2005–8), the Transmission in Glasgow, the Catalyst in Belfast, the City Racing in London (1988-1998) and the Artemisia in Chicago are but a few examples of mostly artist-run exhibition spaces which now exist on the web. For example: http://www.catalystarts.org.uk/ (accessed October 14, 2015). Projects also exist on behalf of universities, another institution in crisis. One of the oldest and best-known is Bruce Robertson and Mark Meadow’s “MICROCOSMS: Objects of Knowledge,” a project of the University College of Santa Barbara that mines the collections of nine campuses that comprise the University of California (Berkley, Davis, Irvine, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Diego, San Francisco, Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz), and seeks to reunite them digitally on the Internet. According to its initiators, “Objects reside in teaching or research collections; in departmental or personal assemblages of memorabilia; in the limbo of closets and cabinets, temporarily obsolete and disposable, but never disposed. They are the sources of knowledge production, the storehouses of that knowledge, and the means of its dissemination. There is one space where all these aspects of objects may once have existed under the same roof and that is the 16th century Curiosity Cabinet; there is one realm where they may be virtually reunited, and that is the Internet.” See http://vv.arts.ucla.edu/AI_Society/rob_mead.html (accessed October 12, 2015).
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