

Mark Dion: Theatre of the Natural World

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Compared to Mark Dion's *Neukom Vivarium* (2006), an 80-foot-long greenhouse structure at Olympic Sculpture Park in Seattle, where a tree existed in an art system with bacteria, fungi, insects, lichen and plants, Mark Dion's compendium of art installations in the Whitechapel Gallery's *Theatre of the Natural World* seems a little dated. The show is tinged with a sense that the events surrounding the Anthropocene have rendered all the postmodern irony Dion dabbles in so masterfully into a mere distraction from the main event. Dion is aware of this. All the works in this show raise questions about art's capacity to deal with the physics of environmental and planetary change; however, some feel out of date, lacking in drama and urgency. The theatre after all is ultimately nature's, not ours.

Mark Dion's *The Library for the Birds of London* (2018), the first thing you experience, on entering into a huge aviary cage with zebra finches flitting about, is designed to make you question your role as spectator, being just one species/object among others. There are a lot of haphazard props such as a pair of binoculars, gardener's tools and rafts of books on ornithology, philosophy, art history and geography lining the branches of a dead tree and even a framed photo of Sir Richard Attenborough! Does it make reference to the *Tree of Life* in the *Garden of Eden*? Dion's scenario is dystopian, yet, somehow his irony seems dated, out of place in an age of global warming: it is no longer very funny or ironic, although the entropic process is evident.

Mark Dion is a master of the art installation: over the years he has turned that genre into pure theatre. For Dion, the process matters a lot more than the elements on view. The hunter's blinds, one of them fallen onto the ground, enhance the theatrical sense. We are voyeur witnesses, hunters of a subject, of an art form that legitimizes the audience. Somehow we feel short changed. There is emptiness in all the calculated gestures. Earlier 1990s projects, such as *Frankenstein in the Age of Biotechnology*, *Toys 'R' Us*, *When Dinosaurs ruled the Earth* (1994) or *The Department of Marine Animal Identification of the City of New York (Chinatown Division)* (1992), effectively challenged the sanctity of Duchamp's concept driven legacy. The climactic chaos and human disruption of ecosystems, of entire systems of life, now render Dion's earlier skirmishes about art's purpose almost irrelevant, an historical footnote to the changes now transforming our planet's ecosystem.

The Naturalist's Study (2018), in the present show, is Dion's *mise en scène* of a 19th century naturalist's study. In this recreation, the art space questions aesthetic and historical systems in which all manner of natural, ecological and cultural elements were "studied." The photos of stuffed polar bears and the quasi-anthropological wallpaper with renditions of extinct wildlife species bring us to a jarring sense of where we are now as opposed to naturalists such as William Beebe (1877-1962) or Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) who collected nature specimens.

Dion's deliberated pessimism and "attitude" to biological or archaeological historical collecting is supposedly intended to disembodify the hierarchies of past colonial empires. Instead, we sense his focus on the historicity of art's purpose itself lacks a vision and clings a little desperately to those past archetypes.

Dion's *Hunting Blinds and Hunting Standards* (2005-2008) blend Situationist theatricality with the irony of an eternal spectator. Process art in our times needs to move on from these arcane dogmas, and step even further into theatre and performance. The inner spaces of one *Hunter's Blind* has a Dandy-Rococo pseudo aristocratic flair at odds with the Survivalist genre, for it has a chandelier, while another has hanging sausages, old boots and a table. Another hunter's blind is stocked with books, maps, binoculars, reading glasses and an array of paraphernalia. On the wall you can see brightly coloured, medieval looking stylized *Hunting Standards* with their graphic symbols.

Shadowing the methodology of archaeologists, Dion's *Tate Thames Dig* (1998-2000), originally enacted at Millbank and Bankside on the River Thames near the Tate Britain and future TateModern and also in the present show, is a taxonomy of classification systems that volunteers gathered and identified, described, named and organized, as if all the past river refuse were plants and Dion is a modern-day Paracelsus. The museum display case suggests old-fashioned power or authority, being arranged like a Victorian collector's Cabinet of Curiosities... but the objects have no commercial worth and imply a new system of values due to their seeming irrelevance. The "collection" includes clay pipes, a bottle containing a letter in Arabic script, pieces of Bellarmine pottery, a fragment of human shinbone, oyster shells, cattle teeth, plastic toys and shoes, all sorted and displayed in this giant *Wunderkammer*

(Cabinet of Curiosities). While it suggests a new order of social and ecological interpretation of “evidence,” Dion’s *Tate Thames Dig* is a haphazard, wild phenomenological collection.

The Bureau for the Study of Surrealism and It’s Legacy (2005) includes mundane to overtly sacred “things.” It is a post-Freudian found architectural installation. The exotic fragment, the unpredictable and the bizarre all meet here at *The Bureau* as a kind of manufactured nostalgia. In an age of overt commoditization and overproduction, Dion’s dystopian colonial divergence into categorizing and objectifying seems obsolete... *Wonder Workshop*, the final exhibit room in the show has 124 Day-Glo, ghost-like symbols on display screens. These include dead animal corpses and instruments. Here we truly see a symbolic display of the human, animal and wildlife victims of human intervention into ecosystems worldwide. The transition from live birds to transmogrified symbols of life suggests Dion feels a “sea change” in points of perception of the natural world. There is no irony here, just a solemn new tech signology: a carnivalesque, fun-house set design for the Anthropocene.

Where will Mark Dion’s art go from here?

John K. Grande curated *Earth Art* at the Royal Botanical Gardens for the Pan Am Games in Toronto and *Small Gestures* at the Mucsarnok / Kunsthalle, Budapest, Hungary in 2016. His recent books include *Nils-Udo*; *Sur l’Eau* (Actes Sud, France, 2015), *Nadalian* (Paradise Art Center, Persian Gulf, Iran, 2017) and *Art, Space, Ecology - Two Views Twenty Interviews* (Black Rose / U. of Chicago, 2018).



Mark Dion, *The Naturalist's Study*, 2018. Installation view of Mark Dion: *Theatre of the Natural World*. Photo: Jeff Spicer/PA Wire.