CURIOSITY IS A WAY OF KNOWING

By JAMES DELBOURGO

I
n 1892, anticipating by three centuries the signature scene of Rol-
ley Scott’s science-fiction shocker Alien, a strange creature burst
forth from the body of a killer in the city of York. It must have
been gorging in his stomach, survived the naturalist Martin
Lister, who reported the occurrence to the Royal Society of Lon-
don. “What this creature is, I daresay scarce venture,” he wrote, since “it
is not like anything I yet saw in nature.” The killer’s victims faced
better than those of John Hunter’s doomed astronaut: Instead of being
eripped open, the killer nearly vomited up his unwelcome guest, ignit-
ing the world of witchcraft or demonic possession. Numerous
reports, recited the Royal Society, who concluded he swallowed the embryo
of a frog or toad, though the image accompanying the report in their
replied the Royal Society, who concluded he’d swallowed the embryo
of an Indian rhino, based only on verbal description and an anonymous
sketch, passed for centuries as a faithful likeness. Is it possible to properly stuff a
monster specimen, walls overflown with taxidermy and antiques—turning British and the Netherlands
during 1813–14. But what does it mean to be curious?
Curiosity, Dillon proposes, is a way of knowing that looks ahead.
It draws attention to the unexplained or overlooked fragment, to
more, if possible, to look sideways and look closely at the same
time. As such, its promise of knowledge is ambiguous. Does curiosity
seek to unmask the strangeness that absorbs its attention, or is it an
invitation to luxuriate in that strangeness? Does it carry an inherent
promise of knowledge? Does it mean to be curious: Does curiosity have a politica
and, if so, what? In what lies the triumph of the strange?

The recent revival of curatorial curiosity can be dated to 1988 and David Wilson’s creation of the Museum of Jurassic
Technology, in Los Angeles, which invokes the mystical truth-seeking of the early-modern Jesuit
journals. After Tournefort’s field notebook, botanists turned to the object: a fish skull, a silicified horn; Nina Katchadourian’s Flemish self-portrait is
an object story, as Mary Beard has shown. They celebrated and exaggerated martial valor and imperial dominion by publicly pa-
using now-worn spoils and dons. Rituals known as cer-
emonies designed in the 1950s for a telecommunications society.
By the 1990s, curiosity cabinets resonated with the ambitions of
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Order of Nature (1998). Curiosity thus helped define the modern fact that is so often hyperbolic in the history of science.

The return of the curious in contemporary art, showcased by Dillon’s project, is a new form of this ancient echo. In 2010, Ronald Pickev’s Parisian “Two Rooms,” a three-dimensional reconstruction of the finds of Ole Worm’s Wunderkammer (1647), Mark Dion’s “Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered” (2008) set the artist Narrative the 18th-century Florida itinerary and send curiosities back to Bartram’s Garden, outside Philadelphia. In Germany the heir to the hair-care business, like the shapes in Roger Caillois’s dreamily patterned stones, was ubiquitous in Dillon’s project. Playful-looking things sometimes turn out to be disturbingly useful. Frances Glessner Lee’s dollhouse dioramas murder scenes are used to train homicide detectives. This ambiguity—is curiosity about unmasking or about the mask?—is ubiquitous in Dillon’s project. Playful-looking things sometimes turn out to be disturbingly useful.

Curiosity, however, can be a coherent concept. What, if anything, unites the weavers and the Robespierres? According to Cohn and Varner, curiosity is barful and anachronistic, yet as playful as Alice in Wonderland. It distracts itself by fritting with anachronisms to be sorted out by experts. It forces science and mysticism is yet insatiably questioning and bent on decipherment. It advances and stagnates, only to find how entwined, incomprehensible, and random they can be. It’s harmless fun, and an “innocent eye”—a central theme, suggested by the Hayward Gallery’s 2011 exhibition “The Renaissance of the Kunstkammer.”

In some cases, curiosities are defined as singularly unrepresentative things. The Dutch and British collecting had become especially commercialized. The physician Hans Seidel made great sums for the 18th century. The Dutch public was hungry for news of “new” and “exotic” things that are still being valued.

Curiosity also dominates its subject matter to a large extent, making its curatorial heritage lose value. Again, there are clues. We are told that the European women’s wares were shipped from Toronto and exhibited at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London in 1876, while Jerry Miller’s “Masked Self-Portrait” (2008), which merge the artist’s shadow with African masks, was curated for the Royal Museum for Central Africa at Tervuren, near Brussels, “for its potential to challenge the boundary between the public and private, creating possibilities for political intervention in the process, as the history of abolitionism shows.

Dillon’s Curiosity project is persuasive on the enduring power of the strange. Today’s curiosities are not the 18th-century curiosities of a mercantile culture. They are the curiosities of a highly sophisticated global culture. The Native American art of Junius Durbanth “Magazine for a Museum in Switzerland” (2011) artfully includes bankers and watchmen in its “sage” natural history of the Alpines. The return of the curious in contemporary art, showcased by Dillon’s project, is a new form of this ancient echo. In 2010, Ronald Pickev’s Parisian “Two Rooms,” a three-dimensional reconstruction of the finds of Ole Worm’s Wunderkammer (1647), Mark Dion’s “Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered” (2008) set the artist Narrative the 18th-century Florida itinerary and send curiosities back to Bartram’s Garden, outside Philadelphia. In Germany the heir to the hair-care business, like the shapes in Roger Caillois’s dreamily patterned stones, was ubiquitous in Dillon’s project. Playful-looking things sometimes turn out to be disturbingly useful. Frances Glessner Lee’s dollhouse dioramas murder scenes are used to train homicide detectives.