

Triumph of the

STRANGE

By JAMES DELBOURGO

IN 1682, anticipating by three centuries the signature scene of Ridley Scott's science-fiction shocker *Alien*, a strange creature burst forth from the body of a baker in the city of York. It must have been gestating in his stomach, surmised the naturalist Martin Lister, who reported the occurrence to the Royal Society of London. "What this creature is, I dare scarce venture," he wrote, since "it is not like anything I ever yet saw in nature." The baker's insides fared better than those of John Hurt's doomed astronaut: Instead of being ripped open, the baker neatly vomited up his unwanted guest, insisting he was the victim of witchcraft or demonic possession. Nonsense, replied the Royal Society, who concluded he'd swallowed the embryo of a frog or toad, though the image accompanying the report in their *Philosophical Transactions* didn't resemble either.

Consider the walrus. Not just any walrus but the giant walrus of London's Horniman Museum. It may not be in water but it still makes a splash, dwarfing anyone who comes near. But its hefty verisimilitude is a fantasy. Its devoted stuffers had never before laid eyes on the blub-

bery bulk of a walrus, and they overdid their taxidermy, cramming it so full they blanchmanged out its fatty folds. Is it possible to properly stuff a creature you've never seen? Fat chance. Albrecht Dürer's 1515 woodcut of an Indian rhino, based only on verbal description and an anonymous sketch, passed for centuries as a faithful likeness.

Then there's the Rolodex. Not a strange creature spewed from some dim corner of the early modern imagination, but the Rolodex: a micro-machine designed in the 1950s for a telecommunications society. Its cards contained the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of personal contacts. And impersonal contacts: Several Rolodexes survive from the collections of Ed Grothus, a technician at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico until he resigned in 1969 over the Vietnam War. His Rolodexes contain business cards emblazoned with company names like "Explosive Technology" and "Plasmadyne," illustrating the corporate relationships that produced weapons during the cold war.

Add to these Gerard Byrne's photographic history of the Loch Ness

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Objects from the Wunderkammer Olbricht, a private collection on display in Berlin

monster phenomenon; the Elizabethan magician John Dee's "scrying mirror"; the rebuses of Leonardo da Vinci; Aura Satz's bouquet of hearing trumpets nestled in a phonograph horn; Nina Katchadourian's Flemish self-portraits in airplane toilets; Thomas Grünfeld's hybrid peacock-penguin (Peaguin? Pencoek?); and the furniture polisher Alfie West's artworks made by literally splitting hairs (gotta love that).

The source of these oddities is Brian Dillon's intriguing *Curiosity: Art and the Pleasures of Knowing* (Hayward Publishing), a new volume of essays, excerpts, descriptions, and photographs that accompanies his exhibit of the same name, touring Britain and the Netherlands during 2013-14. But what does it mean to be curious?

Curiosity, Dillon proposes, is a way of knowing that looks askance. It draws attention to the unexplained or overlooked fragment, to invite us, 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 Baconian injunction to go further and illuminate, or does it recommend the alternative pleasures of *not* knowing? "Enigma lies at the core of the curious experience," Marina Warner comments in a short essay included in *Curiosity*, "epiphany should not reveal all." So is curiosity a wake-up call or a waking dream?

Nothing might seem further from the spirit of the *Wunderkammern*, the early-modern wonder-cabinets that *Curiosity* invokes as its inspiration, than the Roman practice of the Triumph. But this ancient tradition holds a clue to unmasking curiosity itself. Triumphs told didactic object stories, as Mary Beard has shown. They celebrated and exaggerated martial valor and imperial dominion by publicly parading new-won spoils and slaves. Rituals known as *pietas* were performed specifically to harness the power of foreign gods when their statues were unveiled in Rome.

Early-modern curiosity collectors loved to catalog their cabinets: Call it the joy of index. Dillon suggests that such lists also constituted "a kind of story," but do they? The list is an open form, not a closed and completed one. Curiosity collections could absorb countless new objects precisely because they didn't propose a coherent narrative about them. Unlike spoils that tell of conquest, curiosities don't preach and don't teach. What makes them curious is their oblique relation to the world in which they're embedded. And yet, as a matter of historical fact, early-modern Europeans accumulated curiosities in no small part through trade, colonization,

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and war, something one would hardly guess from *Curiosity*.

What, then, is the power of curiosity, both past and present? Is there something of the Triumph, after all, in its parades of the odd? Does curiosity have a politics and, if so, what kind? 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 polymath Athanasius Kircher, albeit through an offbeat California-Gothic sensibility. Lawrence Wechsler, who wrote about Wilson's ambition "to reintegrate people to wonder" in *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* (1995), initially assumed that it must be all a joke. Surely, he wrote, the painted sculpture of the pope inside the head of a pin was "ironical"? Surely Kircher and the early moderns were themselves being "ironical"?

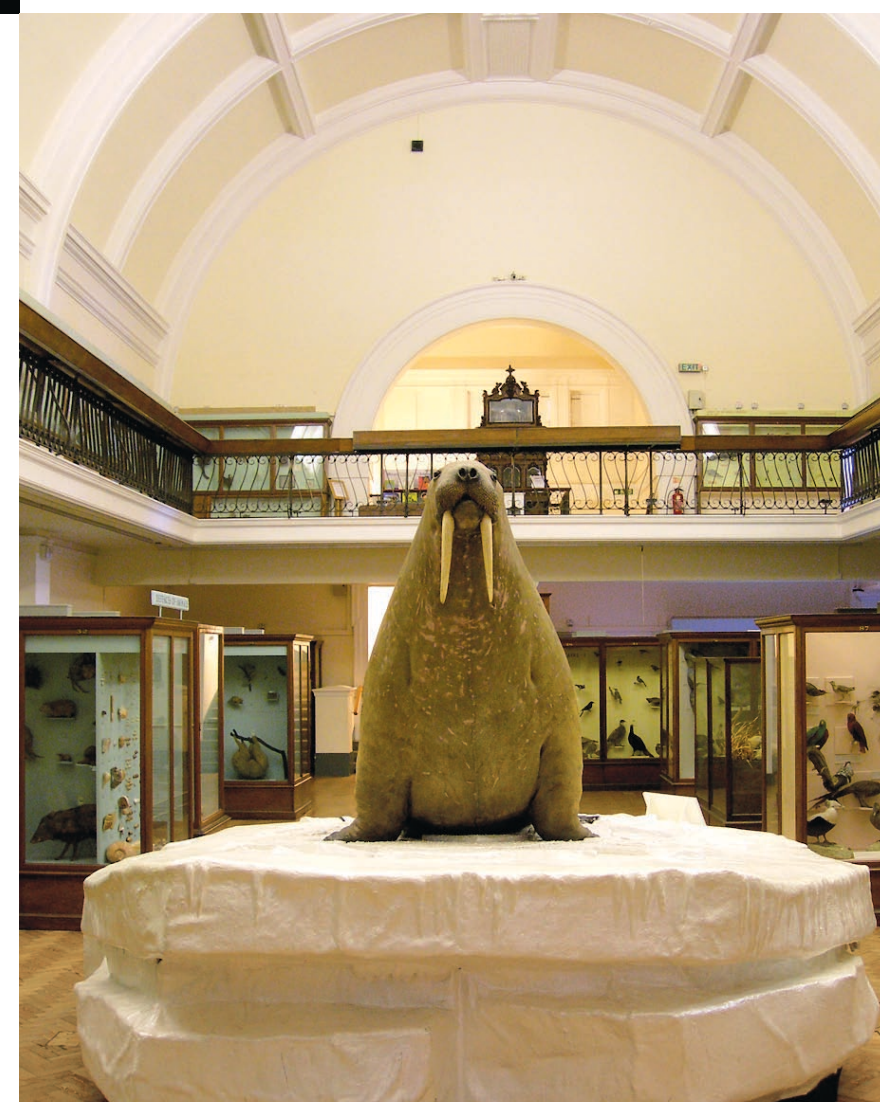
But it was all in earnest, and the quiet-spoken Wilson was well ahead of the game. Renaissance curiosity cabinets succeeded medieval church reliquaries as repositories of matter's stranger powers, only for classification-crazed Enlightenment savants to dismiss them as childish, chaotic, and credulous. The collections of the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II were "long considered the product of a deranged mind," noted the art historian Horst Bredekamp in *The Lure of Antiquity and Cult of the Machine* (1995).

By the 19th century, if you wanted truth, you looked to science; if you wanted beauty, you looked to art. In juxtaposing such things as paintings and machines, *Wunderkammern* offered neither. Worse still, ventures like Ripley's *Believe It or Not*, which originated as a cartoon in 1918, reduced modern curiosity to freak-show commercialism of emblematic shrunken heads.

As museums were built for science and galleries for art, the curiosity cabinet went underground, resurfacing in 20th-century Surrealism—in André Breton's collages, Joseph Cornell's box assemblages, and set pieces like Victor Brauner's "Wolfable" (a wolf whose head and hind legs are joined by a table). Surrealist curiosities subverted bourgeois rationalism, which was discredited by the carnage of World War I, affirming unconscious instinct over scientific utilitarianism and challenging notions of what counted as art. Curiosities also turned political and became part of a radical questioning of reality itself. Breton, for instance, entertained relations with revolutionary and anticolonial political movements, including anarchism and communism.

By the 1990s, curiosity cabinets resonated with the ambitions of interdisciplinarity in the humanities and, more specifically, the post-positivist turn in the history of science. If one no longer regarded the *Wunderkammer* as a bizarre pre-scientific foible, it became possible to ask what kind of epistemology it implied. Curiosity and wonder—distinct terms but often used interchangeably—turned out to be interwoven with theology, civility, craftsmanship, nature's playfulness, and even good old Baconian utility, as Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park argued in *Wonders and the*

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THE HORNIMAN MUSEUM AND GARDENS

The taxidermists who created the Horniman Museum's overstuffed walrus had never seen the folded skin of a live specimen.



Frances Glessner Lee's dollhouse murder scenes are used to train homicide detectives.

fied flea is reproduced in all its glory. What *Curiosity* makes less clear is the historic relationship between curiosity and commodity. Dillon provides some clues here: his linking of curiosity with avarice, for example, and an extraordinary cloudburst of objects on the ground sketched by Leonardo da Vinci, accompanied by the legend, “Oh, human misery, how many things must you serve for money?”

But these clues are few. Early-modern curiosities weren’t just weird; they were objects charged with power, exotic commodities to be bought and sold, and which bought their collectors status. By the 17th and 18th centuries, Dutch and British collecting had become especially commercialized. The physician Hans Sloane paid great sums for his curiosities, and tours of his collections rang with talk of their enormous value. They became the foundation of the British Museum in 1753, the first national public museum.

Curiosity, Samuel Johnson puffed, “precedes all thoughts of profit, or of competition.” But curiosity collectors achieved prominence as connoisseurs of the value of art and nature in all its forms. Sloane’s collections were funded in part by the money his wife received from her Jamaica sugar plantations, while great numbers of objects reached him from travelers employed by Britain’s colonial trading companies in Asia and the Americas. This marriage of curiosity and commodity, largely unexplored by Dillon, shows how curiosity cabinets were Triumphs of a sort. They showcased collectors’ cultures’ command over distance through the naval and commercial power that made it possible for locals to see strange things *here*.

Curiosity also domesticates its subject matter to a large extent, making its exoticist heritage less visible. Again, there are clues. We are told that the Horniman’s walrus was shipped from Toronto and exhibited at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London in 1886, while Jeremy Millar’s “Masked Self-Portraits” (2008), which merge the artist’s shadow with African masks, were executed at the Royal Museum for Central Africa at Tervuren, near Brussels, “notorious for its exculpatory treatment of the brutal history of the Belgian Congo.” The Native American artist Jimmie Durham’s “Maquette for a Museum of Switzerland” (2011) satirically includes bankers and watches in its “savage” natural history of the Alpine cantons.

Objects from the Wunderkammer Olbricht



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the Chinese wished to buy in the 18th century, they often criticized the Chinese lack of curiosity about other cultures, while praising their own (rather expensive) cosmopolitanism. As the historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam has suggested, however, rival powers like the early-modern Mughal court expressed substantial interest in the outside world, regarding Europeans themselves as curiosities, laden as they were with rarities to impress the emperor and broker better trade relations. *Curiosity* invokes its history so insistently—the book opens with the virtuoso John Evelyn’s mid-17th-century ebony and ivory cabinet—that one can be forgiven for expecting rather more curiosity about its own heritage.

WHAT, THEN, of the politics of curiosity today? Early moderns may have dealt in strange new objects that challenged contemporary knowledge, but unlike the Surrealists, they were neither socially nor politically subversive. And yet, even in early modernity, curiosity possessed the potential to challenge moral and political norms.

Take the example of a slave whip that went on display in a London coffeehouse known as Don Saltero’s in the early 18th century. Saltero—real name James Salter, an acquaintance of Sloane’s—displayed many objects,

CURIOSITY IS LUSTFUL AND AVARICIOUS, YET PLAYFUL AS ALICE IN WONDERLAND.

including a “manati strap”: a whip made from the hide of a Caribbean sea-cow. Its listing in his catalog between an “Italian padlock” and a “female embryo” suggests how Salter treated it as merely one among a miscellany of oddities. By century’s end, however, abolitionist campaigners were making use of such objects, as well as descriptions of slaves’ torture from curious natural histories, to argue against the slave trade. Curiosities took on the force of moral facts.

Curiosity’s politics, in other words, are often ambiguous, but latent rather than absent. Because it suspends judgment about value, curiosity possesses a singular capacity to make even the most controversial objects public, 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 *nouveaux curieux* are an enterprising counterculture club. They eschew the boredom of utilitarianism and political organization—something that marks them out from their Surrealist forebears, whom they nonetheless often evoke—devoting themselves instead to oblique paths of enlightenment through the pleasures of play.

But Edward Snowden’s revelations about the NSA raise fundamental questions about the intersection of curiosity, the Internet, and political power. Is the Internet liberating curiosity as never before, or bending it to corporate profit and state surveillance? In David Weinberger’s heroic vision, spelled out in *Everything Is Miscellaneous* (2007), the *Wunderkammer* web democratically breaks down both intellectual and social barriers, allowing us to “confront the miscellaneous directly in all its unfulfilled glory.” This dream of the Internet as virtual *Wunderkammer* is a dream of both free navigation and total information; a naïve dream, that is, at once epistemological and political, of unmediated knowledge.

The freedom to assemble endless digital miscellanies is arguably only a symptom of today’s economic order, in which amassing vast personal fortunes threatens the liberty of ordinary citizens. The Wella tycoon Thomas Olbricht’s *Wunderkammer* is a case in point. This is on display in his Berlin gallery, called simply “ME”—for “Moving Energies”—and features a large number of skulls which, Olbricht has said in interviews, signify his preoccupation with his own mortality. Welcome to the early-modern 21st century, where princely fortunes allow individual collectors to parade their private neuroses as public exhibitions, with the *Wunderkammer* heralding a turn from the public museum back to the aristocratic chamber.

Snowden’s disclosures raise questions about the collusion between the state and private enterprise in managing big data. The vision here is indeed one of total knowledge for the security state and private corporations, which know more and more about us, while we know less and less about them. Evgeny Morozov puts the problem bluntly: “Is smart making us dumb?”

As wealth and influence continue to be narrowed from public to private in our new Gilded Age, the value of curiosity once again comes into focus. It offers an attractive antidote to the mindless instrumentalism of much contemporary capitalist culture. But now’s the time for curiosity to rediscover its political heritage, before it becomes irrelevant to a new generation in need of action, not just play. ■

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Order of Nature (1998). Curiosity thus helped dethrone the modern fact from its hegemony over the history of science.

The return of the curious in contemporary art, showcased by Dillon’s project, is even more striking. In 2003, Rosamond Purcell created “Two Rooms,” a three-dimensional reconstruction of the frontispiece of Ole Worm’s *Museum Wormianum* (1655). Mark Dion’s “Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered” (2008) saw the artist retrace the naturalist’s 18th-century Florida itinerary and send curiosities back to Bartram’s Garden, outside Philadelphia. In Germany the heir to the hair-care giant Wella, Thomas Olbricht, has recreated a 16th-century Berlin cabinet with many fine period objects, while the magazine *Weltkunst* devoted an entire issue in 2013 to “*Die Renaissance der Kunstkammer*.” Wondrous coffee-table books are also back as a form of extravagant visual luxury good—call it Taschen Porn. The quirky *Cabinet* magazine (to which I have contributed) began in 2000 (Dillon is its British editor), while numerous blogs collect eclectic content in the form of quirky personal cabinets. Why so many Wunder-bloggers? Because the Internet revives seductive early-modern dreams of total knowledge.

IS CURIOSITY, however, even a coherent concept? What, if anything, unites the walrus and the Rolodex? According to Dillon and Warner, curiosity is lustful and avaricious, yet as playful as Alice in Wonderland. It distracts itself by flirting with astonishment yet is driven to exacting inspection. It loves secrecy and enigma yet is insatiably questioning and bent on decipherment. It adores intricacy and ingenuity, only to find how evanescent, incommunicable, and random they can be. It’s harmless fun and has “an innocent eye”—a central theme, suggested by the Hayward Gallery curator Roger Malbert—yet leads to dangerous revelations. Or maybe it makes dangerous revelations because of this innocence: It follows its own hunches because it doesn’t see where they lead. Think of the character Jeffrey Beaumont in *Blue Velvet*: “I’m seeing something that was always hidden.”

“Untranscended materiality”: this is how the anthropologist Peter Pels defines curiosities—as singularly unrepresentative things—things that almost point to other things, but ultimately only back at them-

selves, like the shapes in Roger Caillois’s dreamily patterned stones, one of which adorns *Curiosity*’s cover. This irreducibility is surely one reason that curiosity still resonates in art and scholarship. Humanists like Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* (Duke University Press, 2010) have been calling for a return to studying material things as agents in their own right rather than seeing them as passive containers of meaning—the “new materialism” versus “social constructivism,” if you like. In this view, curiosities’ resistance to categorization incarnates a recalcitrant thingness. Like Caillois’s stones, they absorb our attention rather than reflect it, frustrating our desire to make them refer to this or illustrate that. They mesmerize because we can’t make sense of them.

But this is also why curiosity has always courted calumny: It suspends judgment about value. Captain Cook’s mariners nabbed Pacific Island artifacts without understanding what they were, hoping to sell them back in London, while lampoons of the Royal Society, stressing the uselessness of its Fellows’ projects, date back a century earlier to Thomas Shadwell’s withering *Virtuoso* (1676).

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. Frances Glessner Lee’s dollhouse diorama murder scenes resemble little more than macabre fancy in miniature, yet they’re used to this day to train homicide detectives. Grothus’s Rolodexes suggest all sorts of lethal uses: They contain the corporate networks of the military-industrial complex. They’re also artifacts of bureaucratized curiosity. Dillon points out that cabinets evolved from wonder-chambers to storage apparatus for tracking the citizenry through modern policing techniques, from the French Revolution to the Stasi and now the National Security Agency’s Prism program for hoovering up the metadata generated by Internet users.

CURIOSITY WAS A PASSION routinely denounced by medieval clerics as a sinful lusting after forbidden knowledge, especially heinous in Eve and her female heirs. Yet, by the 17th century, it epitomized the new science’s focused male attention on matters of fact, exemplified by works like the *Micrographia* (1665), from which Robert Hooke’s magnificently magni-