

# On The Necessity of Wonder

**Silke Dettmers**

How to explain an artwork to a committee.

*The importance of not knowing. Wunderkammern and curiosity cabinets.  
Some thoughts on the real, the surreal and the contemporary surreal.  
The aspirations of words and the difficulties with 'proof.' Heterotopias.  
Questions rather than answers.*

---



fig. 1

A blacked out seminar room, the end of a long 'Research Review' day. I have just shown a myriad of slides, the record of a recent exhibition. Then, out of the dark, a voice asks: 'Do you think you have you achieved what you set out to achieve?'

A simple enough enquiry, put kindly enough. Yet, it floors me. I see no way of answering it.

Puzzled, I struggle to address the question in the only way I know: and that is to show even more images - this time of plans/sketches of work that I *could* have made, *might* still make, have discarded, possibly will come back to... - a poor response, I fear.



Stuck in a dark classroom on a bright sun- filled day, I am asked to account for my art - after all, these days, successful research equates funds.



I leave college that night feeling quite inadequate.  
Six weeks later; and the question regarding my 'achievement' has not gone away.  
I discover kindred spirits:

The French curator Vincent Gille writes about the dilemmas of the (re)presentation of surrealism and surrealist works: 'Nothing is more difficult [...] than to give a true image of surrealism, to respect the scope of its debates, to keep its "borderless" limits clear, to reinstate it in all of its deviations, its contradictions, in all the density of its artistic, social and political interrogations. Nothing is more difficult than not to lose track *en route* of the pole towards which the compass points, not to restrict the open field of word or action, and to keep the door to the marvellous wide open.'

Gille speaks about a very specific art historical/ curatorial problem here, within the setting of 'the museum.' But one could also read his observation as a succinct and vivid description of the creative process and the frustrations of documenting it. 'For it is not knowledge that needs to be transmitted, but an experience.'<sup>1</sup>



An early encounter with the marvellous.  
Children are taught not to stare (or point). Staring - gawping, goggling - is considered bad manners, particularly when it takes place in public places and concerns other people. Staring, however is a spontaneous expression of surprise, and as such not 'improper.' It is a response to 'difference' in the world; children stare at what is too big too small or what is of different shape, form, surface, texture, smell. Children often don't yet have the words to describe or ask. Parents/ teachers don't have time or the intention or ability to explain the world to them. Sometimes what the world presents is so complex that words are not enough. Staring is taking in what is outside. Staring is the beginning of getting to know the world. Staring is starting to make sense of the world.

One of my very first memories concerns staring.  
I grew up in the provinces. This was the decade after World War Two. My parents lived on the outskirts of a town, soon to become a city, where newly built houses met fields. At the end of the road, which was 'un-finished,' was a small grocery store. My parents lived for the first four years of their marriage in Achtermoehlen ('behind the mills'), and my mother must have used this shop on a daily basis. But I recall only one visit - that was when I met the man without legs. It was dark in the grocer's shop.

The light from a window must have sent a sideways beam to point to the man, the man who was shorter than me, a four-year-old child: his body finished where his legs should have



started. In my minds eye I still see the dark red piece of wood, on castors – a kind of skateboard - that carried this 'half man.'

My mother then would have pulled my arm tightly towards her, she would have bent down and (possibly under her breath) would have told me not to stare. Later, out of earshot, she would have tried to explain how such mutilations were a result of war. What I really wanted to know though, but now did not dare to ask anymore, concerned the man's remaining bodily functions, the eating and the... I can't vouch for the conversation with my mother fifty years later, I have to imagine it; what I am piecing together here is a very probable dialogue for an otherwise silent scene.

But what I do know with certainty, is what I saw: the joining of a man to a piece of wood. Thereafter, nothing was strange anymore.



fig. 2



The small and the large, the incongruous, paradoxical and outright false are now central to my own artistic practice. My work physically probes gravity and often looks as if held up only by hope. I thus feel protective about the strange and the marvellous and actually believe in the necessity of wonder; perhaps more so now, because as an artist and teacher, my life has inadvertently become bound up with institutions, the very places that have exiled wonder.

The institutional mistrust of wonder has deep roots:

René Descartes states 'What we commonly call being astonished [...] is an excess of wonder which can never be otherwise than bad.'<sup>2</sup> David Hume, a century after Descartes, described



wonder as 'the hallmark of the ignorant and the barbarous.'<sup>3</sup> Knowledge, for him, is proven by proof; and experience has to be fail-safe and repeatable. In *Of Miracles* Hume writes 'A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence. In such conclusions as are founded on an infallible experience, he expects the event with the last degree of assurance, and regards his past experience as full *proof* of the future existence of that event.'<sup>4</sup>

Wonder has no opposite and it thus jars with the idea of proof. Wonder, 'the first of all passions'<sup>5</sup> prioritizes the senses, it is populated by images, it is non-judgmental and non-hierarchical; wonder is a state before words and reason - all of which drives it to the margins of academic credibility. Wonder, in method and spirit, is the antithesis of the institution.

As an artist and academic I ask myself: How empirical and rational is the creative process? How infallible can my sculptures ever be? What are my achievements?<sup>6</sup>

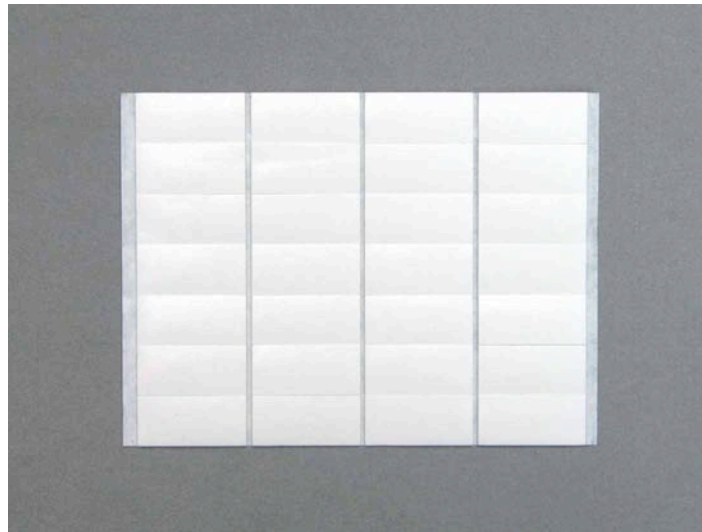


fig. 3



On not knowing.

The currency of universities and academies is knowledge. A knowledge that, in the west, is closely related to reason, proof and the elimination of uncertainty and doubt. However, in the pre-Enlightenment period, knowledge was *not* assumed to be free of uncertainty. Indeed, wonder was defined primarily in its didactic sense, 'as a form of learning - an intermediate, highly particular state akin to a sort of suspension of the mind between ignorance and enlightenment that marks the end of unknowing and the beginning of knowing.'<sup>7</sup> A state of mind all artists recognize and are familiar with.

The initial embrace of uncertainty (and the subsequent loss of wonder) can be traced in the story of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European *Wunderkammer*. The early 'chambers of wonder' later evolved into the elaborate, excessive curiosity cabinets, which in turn laid the ground for the birth of the Encyclopaedia (which unavoidably leads one to the ongoing 'project' of Google and Wikipedia). Of particular interest to me are the physical-



visual changes in the display of the objects of curiosity, which can be read as signifiers of the development of the idea of knowledge itself.

I want to introduce the *Wunderkammer* as a useful thinking model through which to view the difficulties artists have with institutions and notions of 'proof.' Much can be learnt too, from the decline of the curiosity cabinets, which are tied in with the vanishing of wonder as an academic entity.



I imagine the discovery of the Americas akin to man landing on moon in 1969. The world gained another dimension.



fig. 4

Europe around 1500 was caught between awe and explanation. The world, as it was described by divine law, was about to unfold and expand through travel, trade and the military subjugation of unknown territories.

Travellers brought back astonishing tales from their expeditions, and - as 'proof' one suspects - equally perplexing, foreign objects, never seen before and not understood. Characterised by their strangeness as much as by their rarity, these surprising objects were accumulated in the houses of the rich and powerful, the curious and the eccentric. The early *Kunst- und Wunderkammern*, as they became known, had little interest in order and categorisation. Their chief concern was showing off the richness and diversity of the 'new' universe. Their interest was authenticity and spectacle. Hanging from ceilings and protruding from walls, these objects of awe were formed into theatrical displays, becoming objects of amazement - divine/natural objects living side by side with objects/inventions crafted by men: stuffed crocodiles next to Indian canoes, corals and gigantic shells next to exotic woodcarvings, seedpods, spears, pickled body parts (animal and human), the skeleton of a mermaid... and almost certainly an ostrich egg. The visitor found himself at the centre of this 'stage of wonder,' the objects around him performing a 'surround sound' of otherness.<sup>8</sup>





Of coal sacks, coffee and toy trains.

(A detour to the modern *Wunderkammer*.)

The 'overwhelming' qualities of not knowing can be feared or enjoyed. The surrealists certainly opted for the latter. Activating the spaces between incongruous objects so to evoke the marvellous, Max Ernst, Man Ray and Salvador Dalí would have had a field day at Ole Worm's Copenhagen Wormianum Museum. The disorientating theatricality of the installation and absence of a system of presentation of the early *Wunderkammern* would, without doubt, also have delighted Marcel Duchamp, who curated several spectacular and perplexing surrealist exhibitions (which included, on one occasion, hundreds of coal sacks being suspended from ornate gallery ceilings).

There are contemporary examples of artists' *Wunderkammern*, most recently Grayson Perry's 2006 exhibition *The Charms of Lincolnshire*, and the far more ambitious *Thinking Aloud*, created in 1998 by Richard Wentworth: the latter a profusion/'universe' of objects/*curiosa* displayed in a seemingly ad hoc, dadaist fashion. *Thinking Aloud* talked about the 'thing-ness' of the world, and showed visitors how objects talk to each other when placed in spatial proximity; it demonstrated the relationship we have to things, whether that is objects we make, manipulate, or are given (by nature). As an exhibition it was promptly criticised by some for its supposed slackness of curation. With its lack of apparent system/academic apparatus it indeed left ample space for the viewer to make unorthodox links; the show lived by a 'dangerous' - and intellectually thrilling - absence of pedagogy; unlike most museums there was no restraining order placed on the thinking of the public.

David Wilson goes one step further. His Los Angeles *Museum of Jurassic Technology* is a work of installation art as well as a philosophical tractate. Described as 'a temple to doubt'<sup>9</sup> it deliberately sets out to pull the carpet away from underneath the explanation and confirmation of the world that we may expect from the museum as a cultural/educational institution.

Other modern *Wunderkammern* spring to mind: Joseph Beuys' vitrines, Susan Hiller's *From the Freud Museum* (1991-97); Ilya Kabakov's *The Palace of Projects* (2000) or the more personal, intimate chambers of wonders by Louise Bourgeois, such as the *Red Rooms* (1994).

Jannis Kounellis' 2005 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford, contained a condensed, 'museum-inside-a-museum' version of the artist's key metaphors compressed into one marvellous room of magical, inexplicable objects: displayed on a rough stage were bags of coal next to toy trains trapped in plaster cubes; a metal sunflower lit by a real gas flame; a roll of lead on the metal carcass of a bed; and, etched into my mind in this Chirico-esque staging, an outsized white porcelain soup dish with a live goldfish swimming in it - an ominous steel butcher's knife resting on the rim of the plate. The room was suffused with the smell of coffee and coal, the gas flame hissing at regular intervals its industrial breath.







fig. 5

It can of course be argued that the Renaissance collections of *curiosa* and twentieth/twenty-first-century interest in the marvellous cannot be aligned quite so easily just by their shared sensibility for wonder; in each case the grounds for the appreciation of wonder being separated so evidently by the gulf of cultural history. When proposing the 'Wunderkammer as thinking model' I am considering wonder as method, rather than an outcome; a method that does not just produce a single 'achievement', but opens up a multitude of possibilities.



As *terra incognita* became *terra cognita* the nature of the 'chambers of wonders' changed, *Wunderkammern* became curiosity cabinets, the transition characterised by awe giving way to proto-scientific inquiry.

The very existence of the incredible objects from distant worlds had 'brought into question the centrality of Europe and the primacy of its culture,'<sup>10</sup> amplifying the hunger for explanation. Driven by an urgent curiosity, the ambition of these new collections was high: to create a model replica of the universe. And they were compromised from the start: not only was this essentially an infinite project, but it was a goal that had to be accomplished in the confines of the often cramped spaces of the Renaissance collectors' and scholars' *studiolo*. This was no mean feat, as, with the emergence of a market in strange, foreign objects had come another aspiration: the completeness of a collection became as much a value as 'rarity' had been previously.

One could look upon the seventeenth-century collections as an attempt to both open the mind and as a way of controlling the inflow of 'newness,' the unexplained and exotic. Most



noticeable to the eye was the sense of order that started to replace the hodgepodge arrangements of the early days. Boxes and shelves were introduced, displays became labelled. Whilst once the ostrich egg had sat next to a rock of lapis lazuli and a bottled eel, it now was housed with other eggs, possibly organized by size, and quite possibly in a separate room ('Naturalia') away from e.g. mechanical models and mathematical instruments ('Mechanics and Physics'). Shelves became chests of drawers, which, on opening, revealed further drawers that - like Russian dolls - contained more boxes, which themselves were partitioned again... There are records of two extravagant Italian cupboards containing no fewer than 4554 drawers... All this systematisation very much reflected the move of intellectual inquiry away from the visible appearance of the world, and towards its internal workings, which were to be proven by increasingly empirical methods.<sup>11</sup>



fig. 6



The ostrich egg – a staple in all collections from the start – is a fertile symbol of creativity and 'otherness' in one; an apt example too in the context of this essay, which attempts to position the artwork within the institution. I will be using it to trace the story of the *Wunderkammer* further.

Isolated from the crocodiles and placed amongst fellow egg specimens – the white, blue, green, and speckled ones, the minuscule, the oblong, the pointed and the one black one – our ostrich egg now was ready to be catalogued in Latin (*ovum struthio camelus*). An artist was employed to describe it in a fine woodcut and the image was included in an illustrated catalogue. Printed and distributed to the courts and libraries throughout Europe, this document drew an even greater number of visitors - travelling scholars and enthusiasts - to the already famous collection.

Rarity has a short lifespan. With the market in exotica fast expanding, by 1650 the ostrich egg was no longer a sensation. After a period at the back of a drawer, and already out of sight, it eventually fell foul of a 'review of resources' and was exchanged for a more spectacular item. However, no one much lamented its disappearance from view, as the egg had been depicted





so convincingly in the catalogue - perfect proof of its existence in the universe. Then a silversmith, who saw a chance to revive its status, came to the rescue, furnishing the ostrich egg with silver wings and a neck and placing it on a bed of corals and semi-precious stones. No longer valued for itself, the egg was transformed into a dazzling swan; its purpose no longer to arouse wonder but to demonstrate the skill and versatility of the craftsman. An unmissable object of desire for the rich connoisseur, it was quickly bought to join a collection of similar precious and sparkling objects, making the curiosity cabinet it now belonged to more priceless and important than its neighbouring collections. The 'Egg-Swan' was housed in a special drawer inside an ebony cabinet inlaid with mother of pearl and rubies, the rhetoric of its home obliterating it almost entirely.



'All found objects are essentially out of place, testifying to discontinued narratives and uneasy relocations.' In turning the 'strange' ostrich egg into the familiar swan we forfeit the chance for 'estrangement...[to become]...an instrument by which to renew our perception.'<sup>12</sup> Tidying up, physically and conceptually, the uneasy displays of the old *Wunderkammern* through establishing increasingly refined taxonomies, meant shrinking the imaginative space of and between the objects, and with it went surprise and poetry: no more horned and winged, mythical creatures, no hybrids of plant and animal. Thankfully, at least some of the strangest specimens escaped the intellectual cleansing of the Enlightenment: a tree impaled by the antlers of deer that then grew around it is still on exhibition in Schloss Ansbach, Austria; and the famous cherry stone from the Dresden Kunstkammer which was carved with 30 miniscule heads also survived.



fig.7

Wentworth calls the space between objects 'resonance,' 'the way certain things seem to chime.'<sup>13</sup> He reminds us: 'Resonance and association are amongst the least explicable aspects of our lives, but we'd never make a move without them. There are some mythic stories in the history of science, celebrating such moments of recognition: Harry Koto's understanding of Carbon 60 for example, was accelerated by his fond memories of



Buckminster Fuller's dome structures, which he'd first seen as a young man.<sup>14</sup> Essentially, though, Wentworth sides with a less utilitarian view of art. Reflecting on the breadth of creative impulses he refers to an (imaginary) patent office: 'A proposal enters the patent office and becomes definite. You can imagine a patent office for art, where ideas are registered, experiences logged - but it wouldn't be art.'<sup>15</sup>



*fig. 8*

By the early eighteenth century enclosed display cabinets had been introduced, often glass fronted. 'Admirative joy gave way to autopsic glee.' Celeste Olalquiaga, rightly, describes this shift as a fundamental one; these cabinets 'adding a layer of concealment and distance to what until then had been presented as an integral part of the viewer's universe.' The visitor that once had been enveloped in wonders had now become one that satisfied his/her curiosity at one remove; 'they [now] stood facing the cabinets, their frontality signalling that being integral to the universe had become second to looking at it,' thus leaving behind the sensual, three-dimensional experience of the learning of old. 'This particular mode of display unwittingly lays the ground for the fully-developed scientific vision that, abandoning all interest in surfaces, will study natural history from outside in.'<sup>16</sup>

The later eighteenth-century curiosity cabinets - whilst remaining persistent in their desire to create an inventory of the world - provide, architecturally, a sense of linear continuity; Olalquiaga observes that this is a very twentieth-century concept, and she adds that the display of collections like the Bonnier Collection 'read like pages of an open book.'

The transformation from object to word is now nearly complete.



The trouble with words. (Are artists allergic to words?)



No. But they fear that words - like the reflection on the glass of the display cabinets - obscure the view of the object itself. Locked up and anaesthetised, the precious creation was robbed of its scent and replaced by the library.

It is the linear, ordered qualities of language that confound the artist. A sentence 'points,' it has a beginning and an end, it deals in finality. It sits there, tidy, in black on white; it is not uncertain, it has no doubt.

Artists deal with questions rather than answers. With the advent of surrealism, 'a painting or a sculpture or collage became less an object to be looked at than a question. [...] Art became less an access to meaning than a barrier to it, one which none the less held out the promise of interpretation.'<sup>17</sup>

Interpretation, particularly in academia, predominantly comes in the form of words.

The British sculptor Phyllida Barlow is vehement about words in relationship to visual arts: 'Looking, I think is a slow burn [...] Words are quicker.' In a conversation with Alison Wilding, a fellow sculptor, she says: 'But what of understanding, of being understood? Understanding what? Does it matter? Why should art be 'understood' (and what does 'understanding' mean in this context)? That over-used word 'experience' is a catch-all, and too limp and pathetic. Yet it is the significant word because it allows for imagination and speculation, which I believe the non-visual qualities of sculpture depend upon...' And: '...sculpture does not conform to an ordered process of looking: look, then think, then understand:  $1+1 = 2$ . Sculpture is a  $1+1 = 3$  experience.'<sup>18</sup>

(I myself am tempted to describe it as a  $1+1=3$  to the power of three experience).

Art baffles. You can never be sure about a white square on a white square, or you may feel helpless in the surround-world of an installation. If artists feel discomfort with words, so do many viewers when looking at an image. One of the legacies of the Enlightenment is that it has made us suspicious of images; we cannot entertain the absence of a finite explanation for long. William Mueller, writing about mathematics puts it like this: 'Now, in the post Enlightenment, the loss of certainty feels like the result of some sort of guilty excess, and there is an air of contrition surrounding every attempt to re-establish the Cartesian course.'<sup>19</sup>

Words present themselves as the perfect tool to ease the unease in the face of images. Writing about artworks sanitises our encounter with art. (One could note here the necessity that museums feel to provide extensive didactic comment in each exhibition room; resulting in visitors often investing more time in the explanations of the artwork than with the artwork itself.) Words, in their tidy linearity, can finish the artwork off for us. This is art without the irritation of not knowing. Words are not just quicker, they also are safer.

Words are portable and we are used to them attaching themselves to all human activity and experience. Their superiority over the image appears to be proven by this very flexibility.

But image and word live in parallel, yet separate hemispheres.



'Sculpture is that oddball thing that can side-step language - this is why it frustrates writers.'<sup>20</sup> This statement by Alison Wilding is infused with admirable confidence; as such it contrasts with the experience of many artists who only feel acute loss, a reduction of their practice, and a sense of exclusion when their work becomes transcribed into words; this even when writing about their own work. Phyllida Barlow observes: 'The feeling I get from these descriptions is like lying. Telling what the work is about, or what it refers to, creates a separate, rival object, which does not equate with what is there, and can become enhanced with glamour and expectation, something words are so capable of doing, and which the task of looking and remembering, is not.'<sup>21</sup>



There are no Eureka moments in the visual arts. Making artworks starts with an 'irritation' that demands to be resolved; and it finishes with another 'irritation,' a different one from the one that kicked off the creative process. In this way every artwork is already the critique of its predecessor, and as such artistic 'knowledge' remains continuously incomplete. Making art is a process of overlapping questions; as such it is driven mostly internally, lacking any of the intentionality of the typical laboratory experiment. 'Answers' are temporary points of reflection on the way. 'We relish incompleteness, because it signifies that something still lies ahead.'<sup>22</sup> The future of the creative process in the visual arts is, theoretically, indeterminate and infinite. It is impossible to represent it in the boxes of a flowchart, the application form of a funding body or the balance sheet of an institution.



fig. 9

I find echoes of this difficulty with closure described in an article by Tom Barone. Barone, an educationalist, does not see it as a problem solely of the (liberal) arts. He takes issue with



'reducing uncertainty about the truthfulness and usefulness of knowledge' for the purpose of closure, and reminds his readers of the impossibility of final closure even in the most traditional form of scientific research. Whilst acknowledging the psychological need we have for certainty and assurance, he calls attention to the parallel drive in human inquiry, the 'proclivity to endow features of our experience with more than one single meaning.'<sup>23</sup> The methods quoted – known through, but not restricted to postmodern discourse - are described as playful and exploratory; the overriding aim is not to produce 'true data' and closure, but to create an ongoing multi-voiced conversation. Barone tellingly calls this approach to research more artistic than scientific. Moreover, by quoting Michael Baldwin he draws attention to how much traditional academic research can learn from artistic practice: 'The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that were concealed by answers.'<sup>24</sup>



fig. 10

In his 2005 book *Art Practice as Research*, Graeme Sullivan points out, like Barone - and in the spirit of Baldwin - that the nature of the artistic inquiry takes the form of a *quest*; and that this is at odds with the goal of conventional academic research which is concerned with delivering an *explanation*. Sullivan makes a passionate case for knowledge residing in the artwork itself and he demonstrates his claim in great detail. Knowledge is produced through the very making of art, he argues, not just through the critiquing of its results by theorists.<sup>25</sup>

Despite wide acknowledgement that traditional academic inquiry 'do[es] not accommodate the whole range in which humans engage with issues, ideas, theories and information,'<sup>26</sup> the Enlightenment suspicion of images and the methods of their production remains. The hierarchy of artists as (pure) makers and writers as the true scholars is still very much alive in the academy today. As a result, in universities and in arts funding bodies, art practitioners, compete on a very uneven playing field for both status and resources.

The visual arts *can* deliver a unique, albeit very different knowledge production. But it can only do so if institutional expectations and structures, which are currently so dominated by measuring success, 'outcomes' and the question of 'achievement,' are re-thought and replaced by an art specific intellectual and practical environment.







20 August

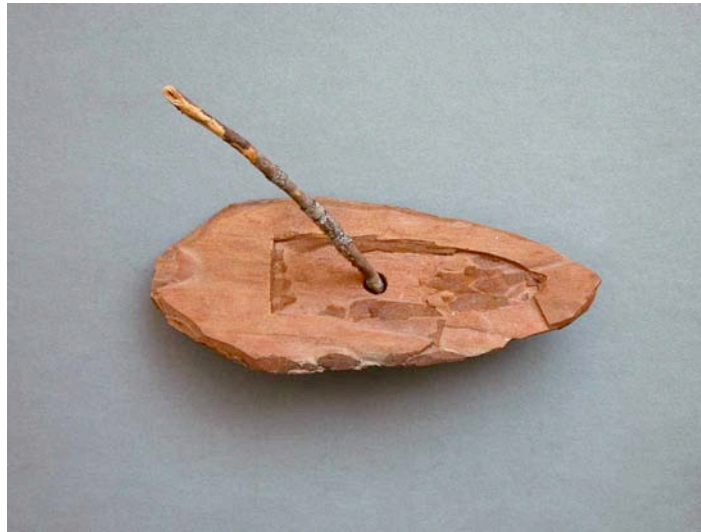


fig. 11

An afternoon spent in the Tate Modern's members' room reading. Seven and a half densely written pages on the institutionalisation of art education. I struggle with the suggestions made at the end of the article. Does playing this 'Game within the Game' - as Beatrice von Bismarck suggests - offer a solution to the problems of conflicting internal and external forces she so convincingly dissects and describes earlier on? There is a whiff of the old idea of the 'infiltration of the institutions' - the acceptable route of reformation (rather than revolution) for the left in 1970s Germany. However, here it comes in the guise of the contemporary terminology of self-reflexivity, the instituting of 'a dynamic through which...[an alternative working context]...constantly recomposes itself.'<sup>27</sup> I mistrust Bismarck's ultimately idealistic proposition; it is over-optimistic with respect to the willingness of all parts of the community of the academy to interact with each other. It underestimates, I believe, the power interests and distribution within what is, after all, a government-funded institution. Bismarck's use of the word 'game,' however playfully used here, worries me too – games too easily can be employed to anaesthetise.

After hours of *words about art* I decide to treat myself to *experiencing* art again. On the fifth floor of the Tate, in a beautiful moment of synchronicity, I walk straight into a screening of Gary Hill's video *Remarks in Colour*<sup>28</sup> and find myself spellbound: a young girl (Hill's daughter) is reading out aloud from Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour*. Forty-three minutes in one unedited stretch. Quite obviously very bright, and fluent for her age, she reads whole passages with seeming understanding of the text; but in other places she struggles with the words and their pronunciation: 'ir- refu- ata- bel- aly'; 'marely/ merrily/ merely.' Despite the visible, absolute dedication to her set task, her intonation, invariably, drills holes into the meaning of what she reads.

I quickly get lost between the disconnected words she is spelling out for me. I look rather than listen. There is the bright red colour of the book, and the blue dress with white flowers (her





favourite?). I study the grey of the background in relationship to the red and the blue (I had walked past three Mondrians on the way in). The screen must be six metres by five metres at least - huge. White numbers are ticking away in the top right hand corner of the screen: '44,' '45,' etc. Counting time? Counting paragraphs? '57' comes with the additional, mysterious words 'I feel x' and 'I observe x.' The gallery notes try to be helpful: 'Hill highlights the way that we generally find ourselves somewhere between states of understanding or not understanding something, always in the process of comprehension.' I am thinking of Vermeer. On my last visit to Amsterdam I spent what must have been three quarters of an hour in front of *Woman Reading a Letter*,<sup>29</sup> trying to 'learn by heart' the colour blue in that painting.

By the time Anastasia Hill reaches '67' she is clearly exhausted: her little shoulders are heaving with the great effort all this costs her. She must be about 10 years old. Did she volunteer for this task? Was she cajoled into appearing in front of the camera? Did she want to please her father? Will she receive praise at the end? Lovely, flawless, Californian skin. She scratches her cheek, her neatly combed, sun-bleached hair now falls across her face. Her body slumps a little more. And I sigh a little with her/for her when, on turning the page, even more words appear to be conquered. On her behalf, I feel temporary relief when something does make sense. I have quickly become her.

'88,' she can close the book. She briefly sits up properly.  
Cut.



A postscript.

New York, this year. On a holiday from writing about wonder. I have taken the E train deep into Queens. The lights in the carriage can't be more than 10 watts at the most. Rush hour. Some way behind me a beggar makes his way through the crowded car - I can hear him rattling coins in a plastic cup long before I see him. My defences go up, I do not want to be approached, I want to stay on my long island of urban anonymity. I turn around and there he is - again - the man with no legs, no 'skateboard' this time, but wrenching himself along the wooden floor. His head no higher than my thigh.



fig. 12



---

## Table of Illustrations

1	Silke Dettmers, 2006 <i>Richter</i> , (detail) reclaimed wood, doll's house lights, dolls house furniture l: 320cm x h: 180cm x d: 180cm	7	Canonbury, London N4, circa 1980 <i>The Log that Devoured the Wire</i> wood, electric wire l: 17cm x h: 26cm x d: 9,5cm
2	VB Wholesale Ltd., 2007 <i>Ginco</i> Popcorn (popcorn, vegetable oil, salt) l: 2,3cm x h: 3cm x d: 1,8cm	8	origin unknown, purchased Aug 2007 Edinburgh, Scotland <i>The Universe</i> (Gobstopper) boiled liquid sugar l: 5,5cm x h: 5,5cm x d: 5,5cm
3	The Sellotape Company, c. 2005 (?) <i>Sticky Fixers</i> 28 selfadhesive double sided foam pads (12mm x 25mm) l: 11cm x h: 8,1cm x d: 0,15cm	9	The Government of the GDR, 1961 <i>Berlin Wall</i> , (fragment) reinforced concrete l: 2,7cm x h: 6.1cm x d: 2cm
4	Safari Ltd., Miami FL, 20th cent. <i>White Rhino</i> plastic l: 14,1cm x h: 6.5 cm x d: 4cm	10	Estonia, paleolithic period (?) <i>Stone within a Stone</i> aggregate of minerals l: 2,4cm x h: 3,7cm x d: 1,8cm
5	origin unknown, 20th cent. <i>Saint</i> (with protective cover) plastic l: 1,5cm x h: 5,2cm x d: 1,5cm	11	anon., found Aug 2004, Canal du Midi, France carved wood l: 13,3cm x h: 7,3cm x d: 5,7cm
6	Squirrels, Meadow Park, Edinburgh, Scotland, 2007 <i>Leftovers</i> gnawed seeds (species unknown) size: variable	12	Silke Dettmers, 2007 <i>Lucky Dice</i> wood l: 2,9cm x h: 2,9cm x d: 2,9cm

---



## Endnotes

- 1 Vincent Gille, 'Surrealism Today: Two Books, A Few Questions and The Mood of the Times,' *Papers of Surrealism*, Issue 3, 2005, [www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/publications/papers/journal3/acrobat\\_files/Gille.pdf](http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/publications/papers/journal3/acrobat_files/Gille.pdf), 1- 2 [accessed 20 July 2006].
- 2 René Descartes quoted in William Mueller, 'Mathematical Wunderkammern,' *American Mathematical Monthly*, Vol. 108, November 2001, <http://www.wmueller.com/home/papers/wund.html>, 787 [accessed 6 August 2006].
- 3 David Hume quoted in Vik Muniz, *Reflex: a Vik Muniz Primer*, New York, Aperture Foundation, 2006, 193.
- 4 David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, Of Miracles, Part 1*, Tom Beauchamp (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, 170.
- 5 Descartes quoted in Margeruite La Caze, 'The Encounter between Wonder and Generosity,' *Hypatia*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2002, [www.iupress.indiana.edu/journals/hypatia/hyp17-3.html](http://www.iupress.indiana.edu/journals/hypatia/hyp17-3.html), 2 [accessed 6 August 2006].
- 6 For Carolee Schneemann these questions are gendered. In 1975 she puts her disagreements with American establishment art critics in dialogue form:  
  
'I HAVE DONE AWAY WITH EMOTION INTUITION INSPIRATION SPONTANEITY [HE SAID...] -- THOSE UNCLEAR TENDENCIES WHICH ARE INFLICTED UPON VIEWERS [...]'  
  
'HE PROTESTED YOU ARE UNABLE TO APPRECIATE THE SYSTEM THE GRID THE NUMERICAL RATIONAL PROCEDURES - THE PYTHAGOREAN CUES [...]'  
  
'I SAW MY FAILINGS WERE WORTHY OF DISMISSAL I'D BE BURIED ALIVE MY WORKS LOST [...] HE SAID WE THINK OF YOU AS A DANCER'  
  
Text excerpts from Carolee Schneemann, 'Interior Scroll,' 1975, photographic print; exhibited in *Into Me/ Out of Me*, June-September 2006, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Centre, New York.
- 7 Adalgisa Lugli quoted in Lawrence Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder: Pronged Ants, Horned Humans, Mice on Toast, and Other Marvels of Jurassic Technology*, Vintage Books, New York, 1995, 89- 90.
- 8 Apropos staring (and pointing), it is worthwhile to note that even the earliest depictions of *Wunderkammern* - such as the much reproduced engraving of that of Ferrante Imperato in Naples (1599) – include figures: guides pointing with sticks, and visitors - heads turned upwards - gawping. It is a well-known fact that the owners of collections often employed dwarfs as guides, their exceptional stature creating an additional 'live' curiosity factor.
- 9 Mark Sanderson, 'The Wrong End of Art,' in *The Wrong End of the Telescope*, Three Colts Gallery, London, 2006, 3.
- 10 Mueller, 'Mathematical Wunderkammern,' 786.
- 11 Patrick Mauries describes a certain 'obsessive and indefatigable' Ulisse Aldrovani (1522- 1605), the proud owner of the mentioned cabinets with thousands of drawers -



- also professor at Bologna University - who 'would write notes on scraps of paper and place them in bags, alphabetically arranged, before doggedly re-ordering them once again and gluing them on to sheets. At his death, he left 360 manuscript volumes [...].' In the catalogue of his museum 'he [even] categorized the visitors to his collection according to their geographical origins and social standing.' See Patrick Mauries, *Cabinets of Curiosities*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2002, 150.
- 12 Sanderson, 'The Wrong End of Art,' 3.
- 13 Wentworth's notion of 'resonance' brings to mind Albert Einstein: 'The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion, which stands at the cradle of true art and science. Whoever does not know it can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed,' Einstein quoted in Weschler, *Mr Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, 127.
- 14 Richard Wentworth in conversation with Roger Malbert, 'Thoughts on Paper,' *Richard Wentworth's Thinking Aloud*, National Touring Exhibitions, Hayward Gallery, London 1999, 7.
- 15 Wentworth, 'Thoughts on Paper,' p. 11. This resonates with Gaston Bachelard's remark, 'In poetry, non-knowing is a primal condition; if there exists a skill in the writing of poetry, it is in the minor task of associating images.' Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*, Massachusetts Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, xxxii. See also Bachelard's warning 'If we cannot imagine, we cannot foresee,' *The Poetics of Space*, xxxiv.
- 16 Celeste Olalquiaga, 'Object Lesson/Transitional Object', *Cabinet* magazine, No. 20, 2005, 8-11.
- 17 Darian Leader, 'Sleep of Reason: Unconscious desire, self-destruction and despair [...] have long been an inspiration for artists and writers,' *The Guardian*, Review, 19 November, 2005.
- 18 Phyllida Barlow, 'At Sea: a conversation by fax between Phyllida Barlow and Alison Wilding 22.08.98 – 02.09.98,' in *Phyllida Barlow: Objects For... and Other Things*, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2004 81- 96.
- 19 Mueller, 'Mathematical Wunderkammern,' 794.
- 20 Alison Wilding in Barlow, 'At Sea,' 90.
- 21 Barlow, 'At Sea,' 87.
- 22 Maxine Greene quoted in Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks CA, London and New Dehli, 2005, 115.
- 23 Tom Barone, 'Science, Art, and the Predispositions of Educational Researchers,' *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 30, 2001, [http://www.aera.net/uploadedFiles/Journals\\_and\\_Publications/Journals/Educational\\_Researcher/3007/AERA3007\\_RNC\\_Barone.pdf](http://www.aera.net/uploadedFiles/Journals_and_Publications/Journals/Educational_Researcher/3007/AERA3007_RNC_Barone.pdf) [accessed 5 September 2006], 24-28.
- 24 Barone actually uses a variation of the Baldwin quote in his article which differs slightly from the one stated in this essay: 'Good art [...] is capable of 'lay[ing] bare questions that have been hidden by the answers.' 'Science, Art, and the Predispositions of Educational Researchers,' 25.



- 25 Barone states: 'Most art based researchers do not seek hegemony for our work over any sort of useful science. What we seek is parity.' 'Science, Art, and the Predispositions of Educational Researchers,' 27.
- 26 Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research*, 225.
- 27 Beatrice von Bismarck, 'Game Within the Game: Institution, Institutionalisation and Art Education,' in Nina Moentmann (ed.), *Art and its Institutions*, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2006, 124- 131.
- 28 Gary Hill, *Remarks on Colour*, 1994, single channel video projection, 43 min, 13 sec; exhibited at Tate Modern, London [viewed 20 August 2006].
- 29 Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Reading a Letter*, c.1662-63, oil on canvas, 46.5 x 39cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

Silke Dettmers is a sculptor. A Senior Lecturer, she teaches at the University College for the Creative Arts, Maidstone. Most recently her work was exhibited in *The Wrong End of the Telescope*, Three Colts Gallery London (2006), and *Through the City*, The Nunnery, London (2004). She will show at the London Art Fair in January 2008.

