

ART/NATURE. INTERVENTIONS AT THE MUSEUM FÜR NATURKUNDE BERLIN

Edited by Anita Hermannstädter

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A Passion for Natural History Museums

Susanna Schulz interviewed the artist Mark Dion in November 2017 during his preparations for the fourth round of artistic interventions for the Museum für Naturkunde. They spoke about the distinctive aspects of creating artistic work within the frame of natural history as well as about the sociopolitical role of natural history museums.

Susanna Schulz: In your opinion, why have artists become more and more interested in natural history and in research collections?

Mark Dion: Artists have always been interested in nature. In every generation of artists there are some who focus on nature as a topic: on what does nature mean in a particular time, for a particular group of people? How are ideas about nature changing? Artists have always understood this subject as a vital interrogation of their own culture.

Susanna Schulz: You yourself have been working in this context for more than thirty years and your art work often raises questions on the philosophical perspectives of natural science phenomena. What is your personal approach to nature and to natural history museums?

Mark Dion: Well, as a young artist visiting art museums, I found myself very dissatisfied with the questions they were asking and disappointed with the way they were answering those questions. So, I drifted from the art museum to the natural history museum. This place where people asked quite significant questions. Who are we? Where do we come from? What are our obligations to the natural world? What does nature mean? How does it change? Where are we in the trajectory of the history of the planet? Now those are the interesting questions. So while much of the art I was looking at was asking questions about art with art, natural history museums were using artful methods to ask profound questions about the nature of life on earth. I was drawn immediately to this culture of natural history museums.

Susanna Schulz: What inspired you to become involved with the Museum für Naturkunde? What was the initial impetus for your work?

Mark Dion: The natural history museum in Berlin is an elite museum in that it continues to have a large research branch with cutting-edge science. The curators behind the scenes are researching, practicing scientists. A lot of museums no longer function that way. That is an interesting aspect of this museum. If you could go behind these scenes, you would witness a culture of scientists asking questions about the form of evolution, experimenting and returning with collections and data from around the world. I became very interested in what those people are doing. While this is an invisible part of the museum for most visitors, as are the vast storage areas and exhibition preparation studios, this is also where the most interesting things are happening in the institution.

These scientists and preparators have a long history, and they have a material culture. There are people here who have a direct link to the past and understand a kind of beauty in the craftsmanship of scientific technology; people who feel an identification and a sense of being part of a continuity that included biologists and museum designers before them. They are a group of people who have a specific culture, a philosophy and a way of doing things with their own tools and technologies.

A lot of the scientists have very refined aesthetic sensibilities. That is what I find inspiring, these people are a kind of distinct tribe.

“What is really exciting and fascinating about this institution is not necessarily the public displays but the living science that is being done every day”

Susanna Schulz: Which departments did you contact for your work?

Mark Dion: We connected with a whole series of different biologists. We met with entomologists, geologists, with people who study bats, with people who look at corals. There is an incredibly diverse collection of people behind the scenes. I always argue that natural history museums should turn themselves inside out. What is really exciting and fascinating about this institution is not necessarily the public displays but the living science that is being done every day behind the scenes by people who are interested in molecular technologies and population diversity, or people who are interested in asking questions about the nature of evolution. All of this is happening out of sight.

Susanna Schulz: What, in your opinion, is the role of artists within this context?

Mark Dion: I think an artist’s responsibility in a natural history museum is very different from the way natural history museums tend to present themselves. At its worst, a natural history museum asks questions and answers them, so your relationship to knowledge as a visitor is very passive. When a visitor comes to an art museum their relationship is not passive; they are encouraged to be critical. Their response is a critical one; they are judging art with serious criteria of criticism in a way not expected of visitors to natural history museums. I am interested in bringing that critical view and its critical sensibility into the museum to be able to interrogate museology and knowledge. I want thoughtful, active visitors in natural history museums where in the past only a passive consumer of information had been expected.

Susanna Schulz: Natural history museums preserve dead nature and, through that, also show the splendour of nature in the past which does not exist anymore. How do you observe the evolution of natural history institutions? What is their role today?

Mark Dion: Within natural history museums there has been a crisis of identity. For a long time, they have been raising the question of what their actual purpose is. In the 19th century, museums were using the taxonomic principle as a way of organisation, and they were in some way an encyclopaedia. Much later, museums adapted to teach and study the mechanisms of evolution. The museum became a didactic space to talk about evolution; and research institutions, like the Museum für Naturkunde, continue to look into those evolutionary mechanisms. But now we have a different situation. We are in the middle of a tremendous extinction crisis caused by human behaviour. We have to deal with dramatic planetary changes like global warming. So, natural history museums also have to evolve their role. What are they supposed to be doing? That undoubtedly means they must take on a more political, more activist role in trying to think about why we need to protect and preserve the natural world.

Susanna Schulz: Were there any special observations you made here in Berlin in comparison to other institutions?

Mark Dion: I think there are different approaches various natural history museums have. You know, natural history museums undoubtedly have aspects of their past that are very questionable: for example, their involvement with scientific racism. I think the only way museums can productively deal with topics like that is to be honest and critical about them. In my opinion, the Berlin museum is exceptional in the way it has been able to discuss that.

Also, there is the way it engages the public with a kind of intelligence that other museums do not. In my opinion, many natural history museums have become almost exclusively museums for children. But this museum is a museum adults can enter and still find a high level of intellectual engagement. For the most part, it's adults – mostly urban – who have the final say on what the world will be like, and because of that the future of the natural world is in their hands. So, it is an incredibly important job to speak with adults about what nature means, what nature has meant and about the ideological uses of nature.

“One of the things museums often do not do is face the mirror, to tell their own stories.”

Susanna Schulz: What enriches a collaboration between natural history museums and artists? What makes it fruitful?

Mark Dion: Natural history museums are often interested in working with artists. The most conservative way they can do that is to curate art into the museum, essentially to take a sculpture, painting or photograph and display it in the museum; as though *that* context would dramatically change the object. A bolder, more interesting way is to invite the artist to make an intervention, invite the artist to think through the museological processes that exist in the museum already and use those technologies and techniques, those methods of exhibition display to say something the museum itself would never say in that sense. It is always interesting to bring in fresh eyes and different perspectives on collections, to have them used in different ways.

Many collections have lost their relevance because a different kind of science is being done today. Does that mean those collections no longer have a use? No, it opens them up for other forms of use, like artistic uses, other forms of communicative uses. That, I think, is a very exciting and bold way artists and natural history museums can collaborate.

Susanna Schulz: Are there any peculiarities in the way you display art work in a natural history museum?

Mark Dion: One of the ways the interventions happen here, when artists are working with the Museum für Naturkunde, is that things have to fit into the existing museum.

We have to find a place for these interventions. So, curator Christine Heidemann and I are always searching the museum for these kinds of “holes” to see where to put something interesting. Where may we add something provocative that would tell stories that are not being told already? One of the things museums often do not do is face the mirror, to tell their own stories. We want to be able to tell some of the stories of these invisible processes that are going on in the museum: for example, the fact that all the biologists who are working in the museum are not here all the time, they are often in other parts of the world. Here in Berlin, for example, there are places where Christine Heidemann and I are integrating some of the scientists’ fieldwork objects into the narratives the museum is telling already in surprising places, in places you would not necessarily expect. We are using spaces, like a closet, which are not normally open to the public to give the public a sense of what might be going on if we could go to each and every person behind the scenes.

Susanna Schulz: A final question, before you catch your flight. How would you describe the cosmos of Berlin’s natural history museum?

Mark Dion: An aspect of the museum, of course, is historic: the historic displays, the historic collections which are significant and irreplaceable. But, at the same time, this museum is dynamic and wishes to convey the newest information and ideas. It is expressing the changes in biology that are mirroring the changes in the world. That is a big part of what is happening here and probably more than in a lot of other museums. This museum is thoughtful. You know, there is a lot of contemplation about its place today, its past, its future in different ways than other museums are considering. I think, the museum is striving to show us what a good museum citizen could be in the future.



Dr Dorothee Brill

Curator and lecturer for art of the 20th and 21st century. After working in institutions for many years, she began to freelance in 2012, having since realised projects in the field of art as well as cultural history. Among other places, she works and has worked for the Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau; the Nationalgalerie, the Schwules Museum* and the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin. Together with the artist Assaf Gruber, she developed a project for *Art/Nature* in 2017. Besides her curatorial work, she teaches at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste and the Technische Universität, both in Braunschweig.

Fernando Bryce

was born in Lima and now lives and works in Berlin and New York. He is one of the most influential contemporary Peruvian artists. His epic and large-scale series of drawings create historical panoramas that depict geo-political themes, ideologies and utopias from the 20th century until today. His extensive historical and pictorial research results in series of ink drawings based on old newspaper cuttings, postcards, posters and other forms of propaganda. The differences between these re-productions and the original documents reveal how we continuously rewrite history.

Dr Charles Oliver Coleman

Curator and crustacean biologist at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin. He read biology at the Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg and specialised on the systematics of crustaceans. He focussed his studies on the biology of Antarctic amphipod crustaceans and later completed a PhD thesis on the anatomy and functional morphology of Antarctic crustaceans. Coleman taught as an assistant professor at the Universität Bielefeld until 1996 before he started working at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin. As illustration is an important method of documentation for his taxonomic research, Coleman regularly offers classes in scientific illustration techniques for biologists and artists. He is also engaged in the museum's public education projects.

Mark Dion

studied at the Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford, Connecticut, the School of Visual Arts in New York and the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program. Among other places, he has had major exhibitions at the Pérez Art Museum Miami, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, London's Tate Gallery and the Natural History Museum, London. Dion's work examines the ways in which dominant ideologies and public institutions shape our understanding of history, knowledge and the natural world. He has received numerous awards, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Lucelia Artist Award.

A K Dolven

lives and works in Oslo and Lofoten, Norway. Her artistic practice spans a variety of media, such as painting, photography, performance, installation, film and sound. Her work alternates between the monumental and the minimal, the universal and the intimate, resonating with concepts and structures beyond the confines of any particular piece. Interpersonal relations and interactions are central to her practice, and many of her performance-based works are collaborative.

Dr Karl-Heinz Frommolt

Curator of the Animal Sound Archive at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin. With more than 120,000 recordings it is one of the most comprehensive collections of its kind. Thanks to his effort, the old sound recordings are now archived in an online database. Frommolt's research activities cover a wide range of bioacoustic problems including acoustic communication, sound propagation and directional hearing. He has a wide experience in field recording, provided several projects on bioacoustic monitoring and is spokesperson for the working group "Bioacoustics in Field Ornithology" of the Deutsche Ornithologen-Gesellschaft.

Assaf Gruber

Sculptor and filmmaker who lives and works in Berlin. Both his time-based works and installations investigate the manner in which the political ideologies of subjects are intertwined with individual, personal stories and the way in which they form social relations within private and public spheres. His solo exhibitions have been held at the Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, and the Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, Warsaw (both 2018). His films have been featured in festivals including the Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin (Berlinale) and the 64. Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen (both 2016).

Ulrike Haage

Pianist, composer and radio drama artist. She has recorded four solo albums at the junction between jazz, classical music and musical improvisation and plays in the band Rainbirds. Along with her work as a radio drama author and a theatre and film composer, she is active as a solo pianist and script writer. Her radio productions are a regular feature of German radio. Haage has been awarded with the Deutscher Jazzpreis (Albert-Mangelsdorff-Preis), Norddeutscher Filmpreis (Sonderpreis Musik) and the Deutscher Dokumentarfilm-Musikpreis.

Dr Gaby Hartel

Cultural historian based in Berlin. She has curated exhibitions and long-term cultural intervention projects nationally and internationally and was Curator for Sound Art in the *Art/Nature* project. Hartel has published widely on the intersections of the visual arts, sound / radio art, literature and media aesthetics, and is an award-winning broadcaster of radio documentaries and sound narratives. Hartel lectures at several German and international universities. She was granted a four-month fellowship at the Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften | Kunstuniversität Linz in Vienna beginning October 2018.

Dr Christine Heidemann

read art history and German studies at the Universität zu Köln in Cologne and the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main. Her doctoral thesis was titled *Dilettantismus als Methode. Mark Dions Recherchen zur Phänomenologie der Naturwissenschaften*. As a curator, she has realised multiple exhibitions, including "die stadt von morgen" – *Beiträge zu einer Archäologie des Hansaviertels*, Akademie der Künste, Berlin (2007); *BELVEDERE – Warum ist Landschaft schön?*, Arp Museum Bahnhof Rolandseck (2011); and *David Bowie* (Berlin exhibition), Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin (2014). In 2016/2017, she was Director of the Schinkel Pavillon art institution, Berlin.

Monika Rinck

lives in Berlin. Since 1989, she has published several books with a number of publishing houses. Her most recent book of poetry *HONIGPROTOKOLLE. Sieben Skizzen zu Gedichten, welche gut sind*, came out in 2012, for which she was awarded the Peter-Huchel-Preis 2013. This was followed by the collection of essays *RISIKO UND IDIOTIE. Streitschriften*, in 2015. Rinck is a member of the PEN Club, the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, and the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung, Darmstadt. In 2015, Rinck was awarded the Kleist-Preis. She translates, most notably with Orsolva Kalász, from Hungarian, she cooperates with musicians and composers, and she teaches from time to time.

Sabine Scho

now resides in Berlin after living in São Paulo (2006–2014). Nearly all of her texts are situated on the threshold with photography and images. Her books *Album. Gedichte/Fotos und Farben. Gedichte* (both 2008), *Tiere in Architektur. Texte und Fotos* (2013) and *The Origin of Senses: An Intervention* (Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, 2015) have been published by kookbooks, Berlin. Her most recent awards include the 2012 Anke Bennholdt-Thomsen-Lyrikpreis from the Deutsche Schillerstiftung, the Crossing Borders grant of the Robert Bosch Stiftung and a travelling grant from the Kunststiftung NRW in 2018, the German Awards for Nature writing 2018, and a scholarship from the Deutsche Akademie Rom Villa Massimo for 2019–2020. Guest professorship at Deutsches Literaturinstitut Leipzig for 2018–2019.

Dr Susanna Schulz

read ethnology and American studies at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, the University of California, Berkeley, and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City. In 2015, Tectum Verlag, Baden-Baden, published her doctoral thesis *Von Guadalupe bis Guggenheim. Kulturmanagement in Mexiko als Identitätsstifter*. She has held positions at the Alte Oper Frankfurt, the Goethe-Institut in Mexico City, the cultural office of Guadalajara, Mexico, the Staatstheater Darmstadt, the Enjoy Jazz Festival, the Oper Köln in Cologne, Radialsystem in Berlin and for the *Art/Nature* project of the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin. In journalism, she has worked for the cultural television programme *Kulturzeit* (3sat), the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and Austria's Österreichischer Rundfunk, among others.

Serotonin

is a sound art duo made up of the writer Marie-Luise Goerke and the audio engineer and composer Matthias Pusch, who create fictional and documentary works in their own studio radiophone. They are known for the aesthetic range and originality of their numerous radio dramas and artistic features (e.g., the programme about Freeter in Japan, *Heimatlos – Tokios digitale Tagelöhner*, Norddeutscher, Westdeutscher and Süddeutscher Rundfunk with Deutschlandradio). They are also known for their performances in urban settings (e.g., *Buddenbroichs. Oder die Angst der Mittelschicht vor dem Abstieg*, Westdeutscher Rundfunk), numerous audio books and sound and spatial installations (e.g., *Audio Guide Special – Story Lines*, Humboldt Lab Dahlem, Berlin, and the Kölnischer Kunstverein in Cologne).

Justin Time

Stonemason, artist and film maker. After his apprenticeship as a mason, he embarked on a three-year tour through Europe before studying sculpture at the Weißensee Kunsthochschule Berlin and urban studies at the San Francisco Art Institute. His films and multimedia installations often stem from interviews and examine that which is seemingly “normal” within contexts of space and social dynamics. Since 2014, he is a member of Lernkultur – Institut für Bildungsforschung und Evaluation.

Andreas Töpfer

Freelance graphic designer, illustrator and drawing artist. He works for the Berlin publisher kookbooks which he founded in 2003 together with poet and editor Daniela Seel. Besides other previous positions, he worked as art director, designer and illustrator for the Canadian magazine *Adbusters* and is currently visual editor, designer and illustrator for the Norwegian literature and culture magazine *Vagant*. Currently he works at milchhof: atelier in Berlin.

Dr Mareike Vennen

read cultural studies, Romance languages and theatre studies at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the Freien Universität zu Berlin and the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris. Her doctoral thesis, *Das Aquarium. Praktiken, Techniken und Medien der Wissensproduktion (1840–1910)* (Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen 2018), examines the history of knowledge and media history of European aquariums in the 19th century. She is currently working at the Institut für Kunstwissenschaften und Historische Urbanistik at the Technische Universität Berlin as a postdoctoral fellow. There, she is researching in the joint project “Dinosaurs in Berlin” about the museum and popular histories of these natural science objects. Her research interests cover media and intellectual histories within natural history, collection and museum histories as well as environmental history and cultural animal studies.

Dr Anna-Lena Wenzel

read cultural studies at the Leuphana Universität Lüneburg and wrote her doctoral thesis on *Grenzüberschreitungen in der Gegenwartskunst. Ästhetische und philosophische Positionen* (transcript Verlag, Bielefeld 2011). Between 2010 and 2013, she was a collaborator in the research project “Urban Interventions” at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Hamburg, after which she has worked as a freelance writer. Since 2014, she is a member of Lernkultur – Institut für Bildungsforschung und Evaluation.

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Susanna Schulz

A Passion for Natural History Museums

Excerpts from the interview with Mark Dion are part of a short video available online: <https://doi.org/10.7479/vcw2-z3fs/1>

Justin Time

Disrupt or Cooperate?

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Cord Riechelmann

Beware of Interdisciplinary Ambitions!

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