Curious Exotica
(Ink on Paper)

Curious Exotica (Ink on Paper)

By

Andrea Zittlau

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Curious Exotica (Ink on Paper)

By Andrea Zittlau

This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-8579-7
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8579-9

Birds?
We can only guess what the birds on these pieces represent or if they are birds at all.

—Text label, George Gustav Heye Center (2011)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

PREFACE

For centuries, ethnographic objects have been collected, categorized and ordered in museum environments to represent European knowledge about non-European societies with complex patterns of interpretation, intention and effects. The idea of the exotic was a crucial part of Renaissance cabinets of curiosities, but it was not until the nineteenth century that ethnographic objects became essential in the process of forming the discipline of anthropology and thus collected systematically. Non-European societies became objects of study in the belief of their imminent extinction. Thus, scholars and amateurs excessively accumulated the materialized remains of people they believed doomed, an activity best known as salvage anthropology. Many objects obtained in that context still populate contemporary ethnographic museums and collections, and continue to present and promote ideas of an exotic other that has not lost its popularity ever since.

Nevertheless, ethnographic museums and exhibitions are disappearing; their name is already no longer fashionable. They are part of the dusty past of adventurous expeditions and unprecedented observations, of the codes of natural history and anthropology, of a time when objects were evidence of spectacular narratives of science—of an imperial and empirical approach to the world. These tropes have lost their public appeal and museums attempt to overcome the decline of visitor numbers with new names that suggest contemporary cosmopolitan and global themes. Current ethnographic exhibitions try to bridge the gap between scientific and popular discourses, old and new objects; they recognize non-European aesthetic expressions as art and increasingly involve those exhibited into curatorial practices. Nevertheless, the ethnographic exhibition (in whichever new disguise) continues to be haunted by its past, imprisoning objects and ideas of the exotic other while talking about the self. It can be nothing else but a monument to its own history and the ethnographic object remains trapped by the limitations of its category that is inseparable from the museum setting.

My interest in ethnographic objects grouped in exhibitions (found mainly in museums of anthropology, natural history and medicine) arose from the strangeness of the idea that objects arranged behind glass communicate concepts of difference and information about different

societies. I have never been able to understand the implicitness with which such a form of communication had been established and wondered about labels that spoke of the visually obvious while most of my questions remained unanswered. Studying exhibitions was not an attempt to answer these questions but rather to understand their absence.

In this book, I explore the idea of the ethnographic object in the exhibition and its multiple dimensions and intersections. When and why is an object ethnographic? What and how do ethnographic objects communicate in displays? I approach these crucial questions with theories of haunting, thinking about the display as a surface beneath which several layers of object-related information are lurking. This information relates more to the ways in which different audiences have approached the objects throughout the centuries than to a desired essence of material-related knowledge. In particular, the object categories of the curio, as an emotional impulse of interest, and of specimen, as a form to classify objects and humans, linger with us even when seemingly reformed. I look at these categories and show historically where they appear and how they reappear (or refuse to disappear) in today's museum world. I observe the voids, the missing narratives and unsolved lives, and their significance in and for contemporary ethnographic exhibitions. Here I come to the questions that remain unasked. My inquiries are at times unconventional. I believe that every question needs a different (textual) approach. Thus, the textual strategies may appear diverse at first glance but they show as such the different dimensions of academic and creative inquiry.

Ethnographic exhibitions are different from art exhibitions. Art displays are perceived as comments on the world. As such, they are granted a depth denied to ethnographic displays, which are perceived by their audiences as samples of the world. Therefore, I will not include art projects or galleries into my analysis but try to make use of strategies and techniques more connected to the art world than the academic context to make my points. Because in many ways, the academic text is like an ethnographic museum—thought to be neutral and obvious, it classifies and provides categories of thinking—it attempts to master the things unthought-of. It does not give room to the weird dynamics of ghostly interactions. Everything has to be said. However, some things become more obvious when they remain unspoken.

In recent years, ethnographic museums have eagerly redefined themselves as institutions of art on the basis of aesthetic perception and market value, but without allowing their objects a metaphysical depth. The objects are presented as beautiful, as sensually overwhelming but disconnected from their collecting and pre-collecting pasts as they are

disconnected from the ethnographic discourse—and yet they remain objects of ethnography. They still function as samples (of other aesthetics) rather than creative comments on the world. As such, they remain surfaces for guided projections. However, there is an abyss spreading large and dark like a hungry mouth beneath the material skin of the ethnographic object and behind the questions that have not been asked. This abyss threatens the ethnographic exhibition into extinction. This book is part of that process and a memorial to that category that has significantly shaped the world. In many ways, this is a ghost story that will remain incomplete.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has been a long journey, beginning with my PhD project more than a decade ago. I would like to thank my colleagues at the English Department and the Graduate School "Cultural Encounters and the Discourses of Scholarship" at the University of Rostock for their encouragement, support and their critical suggestions, especially Gesa Mackenthun, Gabriele Linke, Klaus Hock, Franz Josef Holznagel, Sünne Juterczenka, Michael Bowen, Jennifer Kaiser and Nadine Lübbe.

I am deeply indebted to all scholars and friends who read and discussed ideas, chapters and fragments of this book with me, most importantly Juliane Schwarz Bierschenk, Moosje Goosen, Timo Schulz, Jennifer Gonzalez, James Clifford, Wayne Modest, Ruth Phillips, Stacy Kamehiro, Christian Feest and Dominik Collet. I very much appreciate the contributions of Courtney Leonard, Bea Caballero and Tobias Sperlich who shared their thoughts in the interview chapter with me. Courtney Leonard also provided the beautiful book cover and thus shared her outstanding work.

The Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis has provided a great intellectual space to discuss my ideas and experiment with form. The University of Santa Cruz has welcomed me as visiting fellow and provided access to research material as well as a wonderful space for exchange. I would also like to thank all mentioned museums for inspiring me and for being open and responsive in spite of my critical attitude.

Above all, I am deeply grateful to have such a supportive and loving family, my parents Anke and Bernd Zittlau, my sister Birgit Zittlau, my partner Emiliano Leonardi and my children Luan and Luna, whose patience, love, laughter and support I cannot thank enough.

INTRODUCTION

SPECTRES AND GHOSTS

In "The Horror in the Museum," a story ghost-written by Howard Phillips Lovecraft in 1932, George Rogers, the owner of a private wax museum, is increasingly absorbed by his obsession with Rhan-Tegoth, a deity he had shipped from Alaska to London. In the museum, the artefact is part of a collection Rogers assembled on his "mysterious trips to Tibet, the African interior, the Arabian desert, the Amazon valley, Alaska, and certain little-known islands of the South Pacific" (Lovecraft 2010, 282)—geographical regions that were prominently exoticized during the nineteenth century and became the focus of study for anthropology. The story suggests that Rogers successfully reveals the secrets of ancient civilizations in good anthropological fashion and dangerously engages with things long gone. In the end, ghostly powers turn him into the most gruesome object on display—a memorial to ignorance.

It is no coincidence that it is the mad amateur explorer who owns a museum in the story, and that his business is eventually taken over by Orabona, "the dark foreign-looking fellow who always served Rogers as a repairer and assistant designer" (Lovecraft 2010, 283). It is only towards the end of the story that the protagonist Stephen Jones, "a leisurely connoisseur of the bizarre in art" (ibid., 281) comes to believe in the existence and power of objects he had all along perceived to be marvellous representations of classifiable specimen. Thus, the rationalist gets a grasp of alternative knowledge, the showman gets his lesson for awaking Gods, and the Native gets everything. How easy it is to read the story as a parody on museums of ethnography in the early twentieth century when anthropologists collected objects they did not fully comprehend, when elitist visitors marvelled at exotic forms and native assistants could only stand back and watch the spectacle—or become part of it.

Egyptian mummies, bog people, shrunk heads, and skeletons—the storage and display of human remains inside museums and their spiritual heritage have inspired numerous ghost stories. So did the exhibition of ceremonial or other objects thought to be powerful. But as Sigmund Freud sought to convince us a century ago, animism is a pre-religious concept of

primitive societies, a childlike perspective of the world that Western civilization has overcome—a thesis he certainly developed in an interdisciplinary exchange with anthropologists such as Herbert Spencer, Edward Burnett Tylor and James George Frazer whose work he had been reading.

That museums nevertheless inspire ghost stories may say as much about the concept of animism as it is evidence of the missing link in the logic of the dualism promoted in museum settings—the past and the present, self and other, the distant and the close…male and female, sacred and secular, death and life. The multi-layered distances created by these dichotomies assure safe encounters without ever meeting. They allow for fantasies beyond time and place and transform the museum into a place of desire that cannot be addressed with the formula of Western scientific rationality. These fantasies become the ghosts as they remain like words unspoken in the dark corners of the museum-like mind.

I am not writing about museum horror, though, a popular genre and comfortable category for numerous films, novels and short stories, from Shawn Levy's *Night at the Museum* (2006, 2009, 2014) movie trilogy, to Anna Lee Walters' *Ghost Singer* (1994), a novel set in the National Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C., in which ghosts of human remains kill several members of the staff; from the Hollywood classic *Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1933) to Steven Millhauser's short story "The Barnum Museum" (1990)—a description of Phineas Taylor Barnum's museum as a claustrophobic labyrinth home to strange creatures and events. Museum horror feeds on the remains of the once living, on the seemingly dead but alive, on the exotic and unknown. It narrates the museum as a place of curses and magic, illusions and confusions—a haunted house. To distinguish these ghosts from the hauntings that inhabit this book, I will speak from now on of spectres when addressing the uncanny notions provoked by the display of ethnographic objects.

Introduced by Jacques Derrida and Avery Gordon almost simultaneously in the early 1990s, the theory of haunting—different from notions of popular ghosts—has become a concept widely applied in the humanities. In *Spectres de Marx: L'Etat de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (1993), Jacques Derrida coined the term hauntology (*hantologie*) a near homonym (at least in its original French) to ontology. Hauntology questions the focus on material and manifested forms of being by introducing the spectre as an omnipresent and yet absent character—an invisible and influential form of presence. The spectre, Derrida suggests, is in between; a state of irritation, confusion and mystery that we have to learn to live with. He speaks of the *revenant*, a repetition,

always expected to return (from the past or from the future) and haunt. Thus, the spectre becomes potentially the remains of that which cannot be forgotten (or that which is too easily neglected). Conceptualized as an inevitable threat, Derrida's spectres (dis)embody what should not be, they are emotional diagnoses and moral categories depending on notions of fear of the unknown (the unseen) whose presence (a timeless existence) is never impossible, whose dark power cannot be denied. At the heart of Derrida's hauntology is the inevitability of being seen while not being able to see the observer, a familiar recipe of power and oppression. In this context, ethnographic museums are clear-cut power constellations of collectors and collected. Hauntology then threatens the omnipotence of the collector by suggesting that the objects are not detached from their collecting contexts or their pre-collecting pasts. It questions the superiority of the collector's gaze (represented by the display) by introducing its limitations through a possibility of other presences.

The academy has perceived (ethnographic) museums as institutions of power that determine the norm, as manifestations of science's uncertain order, as evidence to the world made rational and comprehensible. As Benedict Anderson, Tony Bennett and others have argued, the museum developed as a division of an apparatus of institutional control producing an economy of cultural power in the nineteenth century (Anderson 1983, 178-185; Bennett 1995, 20-23). It created a much-needed collective consciousness and made an expanding world easily accessible. In many ways, ethnographic exhibitions replaced travel experiences by simulating them, thus enforcing exotic encounters as educational enterprises. The museum presented collected communities as childlike, primitive, backward and uncivilized (compared to European ideas of advancement) and thus confirmed the superiority of the scientists (and the collecting communities).

As an object-driven institution, the ethnographic museum stores, presents and preserves material culture. In current post-, neo- and de-colonial scenarios, the visually and materially exotic is mass produced and readily available in advanced technological ways. Ethnographic exhibitions are trapped by strategies of estrangement that rely inevitably on the dichotomies provoked by the collecting context of the material. The display of objects has become a familiar trope that in a way has lost its exotic appeal but not its power of enchantment. Postcolonial approaches to ethnographic museums recover the suppression and silencing of voices (of the collected) with an attempt of reconciliation. Scholars uncover the tricky distributions of agency and insist on the presence of various points of view in exhibitions (see for example Lavine and Karp 1991, McCarthy

2007). However, the attraction of the ethnographic object derives from an imperial nostalgia that is in itself almost historical (Rosaldo 1989). Its audience can (re)claim the objects as evidence to imperial history, to scientific discourses, to adventurous discovery stories or traumatic processes of dispossession. The approach to objects (and their interpretation) is faithful to the concept of ownership—whose (version of the) story is illustrated, confirmed or created with the help of ethnographic objects? Moreover, whose story is lost?

In *Ghostly Matters* (1997), Avery Gordon does not so much trace the spectres as she follows the events that create the spectres. Therefore, her spectres are not the ultimate threats lurking in dark corners of power systems but essential aftermaths that resist reconciliation. They are the lives that remain unsolved and unsolvable—the missing stories. In this context, ethnographic museums become containers of spectres in which the haunted and the haunting are the same depending on the point of view. Traces of the unsolvable and unsolved are everywhere. Nothing is easily distinguishable. Gordon's spectres are ambivalent and manifest in words unspoken. Power is no longer clear-cut, but a troubled misadventure. Norms, (scientific) order, chaos and control become shadows of larger things unsolved. Hauntology turns into the questions that have not been asked.

While Jacques Derrida explores the nature of spectres and Avery Gordon traces their source, Diana Taylor provides a theory for making them visible. In her book *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), she understands performance as a possibility to interact with the spectres. She writes:

> Performance makes visible (for an instant, live, now) that which is always already there: the ghosts, the tropes, the scenarios that structure our individual and collective life. These specters, made manifest through performance, alter future phantoms, future fantasies…The power of seeing through performance is the recognition that we've seen it all before—the fantasies that shape our sense of self, of community, that organize our scenarios of interaction, conflict, and resolution. (Taylor 2003, 143)

A performance is a non-static interaction, a unique moment in time that dissolves the sense of time by its radical interactions beyond time. The ethnographic museum wrongly suggests a non-performative setting by giving supposedly universal (thus static) categories and definitions. Nevertheless, exhibitions are not representations of scientific endeavours—they are performances of objects. The objects can produce meaning only when interacting with each other and the museum space.

They are not isolated signs pointing from A to B in the semiotic sense but need to be thought of beyond their glass case scenario. The museum's architecture, the museum's often-neglected facilities such as the café and the shop, and the objects' devoted companions—the text labels all contextualize the objects. As they shine on their individual stages, they depend on the rest of the setting. They enact visions and histories; they remind us of the missing stories and the lives unsolved. This is where the spectres are.

In the following, I understand the museum exhibition as a performance of ethnographic objects in which the spectres are made visible in the voids, the gaps, and the silences. The display becomes a re-enactment of previous displays and in this continuous conversation with the past, the objects are turned into an archive of display strategies and collecting discourses. The exhibition space becomes as significant as the objects' histories themselves and the past, present, and future strangely dissolve.

Chapter One, "Curiosities," deals with the first appearance of ethnographic objects in museum settings. During the Renaissance, the cabinets of curiosities assembled a variety of material that fell out of the ordinary object experience. I argue that these cabinet structures not only return in today's museums as means of clever exhibition designs with historical reference possibilities but more so, that the notion of the curio has always been the dominating force in collections and exhibitions.

In the second chapter, I explore the shift from the category of curio to the category of specimen that took place during the nineteenth century as part of the establishing scientific discourse. I focus on text labels and the exhibition of people here as two significant phenomena that current museum settings are still haunted by. The Ishi Poems are part of this chapter, making texts related to the case of Ishi, who lived in the Hearst Museum of Anthropology in San Francisco, available in different ways.

I continue chronologically, looking at souvenirs as a popular object category that recreates the preconditions of museum settings and focuses on aesthetic expectations. The objects are linked back to the curio scenario and reveal the trap of ethnographic displays. In the following chapter, I discuss an experiment in art-based research during which I created an ethnographic object together with exhibition visitors and interpret their approaches in the context of my analysis.

In Chapter Five, "Voids," I understand the object on display as a marker of voids that need to, or in several cases cannot be, filled. I wonder about the voids we are already conscious about and try to establish connections with. In the chapter's second part, "Raven," I think about a case in which the void is consciously avoided, in which we indeed have all

the information about a particular object and what that does to the category of ethnographic objects.

Chapter Six is a roundtable discussion. I asked three outstanding scholars and practitioners to think about their place in museum settings, the place of ethnographic objects and to share their visions for ethnographic objects in museums. That chapter is also important since museums likewise attempt to include a number of different voices into their displays.

The seventh chapter is a conclusion in which I exercise the previous theoretical discussions using one very particular private museum in Germany. I analyse the display and its meta-museum qualities while thinking about the role of the imagination in museum exhibitions. My epilogue is a fragmented story about an ethnographic object I personally own.

While most examples focus on objects from indigenous North America, the theory developed using these examples is applicable to all objects randomly grouped as ethnography and exhibited in museums with intent to reveal a glimpse of other lives.

CHAPTER ONE

CURIOSITIES

In Renaissance Europe, ethnographic objects entered the exhibition stage as part of a new celebration of curiosity. In pre-Renaissance Christian Europe, curiosity had been the sinful desire for knowledge when wonder marked the valuable point of departure into inquiry. Connected to pleasure and greed, curiosity (as a desire for explanation) was commonly banned, most famously by Augustine of Hippo who firmly promoted the obedient and uncritical acceptance of all phenomena of the world as (the Christian) God's creation. In this context, wonder involved a state (an emotional statement) when encountering the formerly unknown. Thus taking Augustine's writings as a discourse of early Western Christianity, the authorities of the church celebrated the extraordinary while damning explanations of its extraordinariness.

This dual concept of curiosity and wonder was maintained for centuries as obvious in the writings of René Descartes who identified wonder as an emotion that "has no opposite and is the first of all passions" (Greenblatt 1991, 20). Accordingly, an object of wonder "is so new that for a moment at least it is alone, unsystematized, an utterly detached object of rapt attention" (ibid.). This contextual disruption as an act of (dis)possession marks the birth of the museum.

Within the Christian sphere of (pre)Renaissance Europe, the church—as institution and exhibition space—was the first museum celebrating marvels as purposeful miracles of God's creation (see for example Altick 1978, Pomian 1986). Relics (or pilgrims' and crusaders' souvenirs) were often displayed in premises adjoined to European churches and monasteries.[1] Collections included for example

> [a] drop of the Virgin's milk,
> a pot that figured in the miracle at Cana,
> a scrap of a martyr's shroud,
> nails or a fragment of wood from the true cross
> …
> antediluvian giant's bones and teeth.
>
> (cited in Altick 1978, 6)[2]

Relics and other marvellous objects were integrated into the biblical narrative to be celebrated as wonders of God's creation. The Reformation brought these collections to an end since the Puritans opposed the greed exposed by entrance fees, as well as the very idea of displaying objects of marvel (Altick 1978, 9). Eventually the sixteenth-century religious upheaval and its outrageous destruction of the early displays of wonder led to the establishment of the cabinets of curiosities in the secular sphere legitimizing curiosity as an investigation into the processes of life.

This phenomenon coincided with the addition of the New World to European maps. Collecting became an activity of the economically privileged, who commonly referred to their (private or semi-public) displays throughout Europe with the German terms *Wunderkammer*, *Kunstkammer*, *Raritätenkammer*, or *Naturalienkammer*. It is difficult to separate collections from their display, as their arrangement is always already an exhibition even when in the private domain.[3] The word cabinet initially applied to a cupboard with shelves and drawers that held small objects. By the seventeenth century, the term was used in reference to the space occupied by the collection.

None of these terms describing the collection connected the establishment to curiosity. All of them remained in the domain of wonder.[4] The origin of the museum is then not connected to knowledge and inquiry but to an affective impulse of encountering the strange, the visually overwhelming, and the extraordinary. The term *Wunderkammer* connects the collection to the marvels of the world whereas *Kunstkammer* defines the objects as art (and aesthetic expressions). *Raritätenkammer* as well as *Kuriositätenkabinett* focus on the exceptional whereas *Naturalienkammer* exclusively on the category of *naturalia*.

During the enlightenment, narratives of nature became increasingly important explanations of life, whereas religious narratives continued to be materialized on a smaller scale. The cabinets of curiosities are often presented as evidence of those new efforts to categorize the world since the very same objects previously found in Christian collections now referred to secular (scientific) narratives and thus to new ways of making sense of the world.[5] "Antediluvian giant's bones and teeth," for example, were now no longer evidence of Goliath's existence. Carefully measured they became part of a scientific narrative of the monstrous as can be seen in the cabinet of Robert Hubert who listed "a giant's thigh bone more than four feet in length, found in Syria" next to horns of a dog from China, a rib of a Triton or Mereman, and a pelican's head.[6]

In contrast to persisting assumptions, the cabinets of curiosities were not just creative chaotic displays of amassed objects. Frequently, the order

of the exhibitions was ruled by space or the aesthetic perceptions of their owners, displaying the entire collection to reveal wealth by quantity. In accordance with the scientific discourse of the time, the display was usually divided into *artificialia*, embracing everything made by man, and *naturalia*, referring to the marvels of nature. A third category, *scientifica*, was often added, comprising instruments and automatons and sometimes *exotica*, in reference to objects supposedly from geographically distant regions, were set apart.[7] According to the individual preferences of the owners, specific categories dominated. Peter the Great is known for having had a particular interest in the monstrous, whereas Rudolf II of Prague had apparently been attracted to the occult and August II the Strong to technical inventions and exceptional artisanship.

The collections were framed by paintings depicting scenes from the Bible. Portraits of the collection-owners established an interpretative context to the exhibition governing the objects. The display did not focus on the individual objects, but on their relationship to other objects in direct visual comparison to establish a "compendium of all rare strange things" (Borel cited in Daston and Park 1998, 272). All objects were perceived to be extraordinary as examples of exceptional workmanship, decorative rarities and unusual creations of nature. While some of the extraordinary objects fall in the category of the monstrous as has been discussed by scholars like Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park (1998), many objects were perceived to be particularly beautiful or seemingly impossible (for example miniatures such as the canonical cherry stone with engravings). The aim was to assemble a bizarre parade of the grotesque with a canon of objects easily recognizable as part of that parade such as the "manucodiata or bird of Paradise," as noted in Hubert's inventory list,

> with feet,
> for it hath great feet,
> to show that it perches on trees
> in a land as yet unknown,
>
> for they are never seen alive,
> but are always found dead
> in the Malaccos Islands,
>
> by reason of a continual wind
> that bloweth six month one way
> and six month the other way,
>
> and because of their sharp head,
> little body,

and great feathered tayle,
they are blown up
so high
that they fall
dead

in another climate or country.
(cited in Altick 1978, 13)

The bird of paradise was usually brightly coloured and not natural to the location in which it was exhibited. Its name easily gives away the religious connotations that were then projected onto the regions in which the bird was found. Yet the narrative in the inventory suggests a desire to observe the bird alive when apparently the narrator has only seen it stuffed and prepared for trade and travel. The conclusions drawn from the stuffed body seem to be adventurous to today's readers and yet of a desperate attempt to explain the specific object's origin. The fragments of experience, stories and conclusions in reference to the bird's stuffed body reveal the transition from curiosity to science—no longer a desire for an explanation but the explanation given with the help of natural phenomena loosely related to the exhibited object. Curiosity then was the longing for a different, non-biblical master narrative that by its nature questioned the Christian world order to eventually confirm it.

The Cabinets

The main characteristic of early exhibitions was the visible attempt to order the world by a synchronic fashion of multiple stories developed in connection to the displayed objects. As Ken Arnold observed: "What were presented were not so much objects that spoke for themselves as narrative webs constructed about objects…" (Arnold 2006, 87). Comparable to Pueblo story telling techniques, the narratives in the cabinets of curiosities developed just like spider webs: Many little threads radiated "from a center, criss-crossing each other. As with the web, the structure will emerge as it is made" as Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko suggested (cited in Fitz 2004, 16). But as with the spider web, the narrative was (pre)structured and evolved around a centre, that is not so much a core of narrative material but a frame of possible relations, i.e. to the world.

In the cabinets of curiosities, the narrative (in the form of object-related anecdotes) was not indicated by text labels but usually communicated by the collector himself who guided his visitors through the

exhibition. Certainly, multiple narratives about the objects and their contexts coexisted, particularly when the cabinets of curiosities were open to a larger number of visitors (Collet 2007, 222). In diplomatic negotiations as well as social events, the exhibition of the strange was an ideal stage to encourage conversation departing from the curio. Personal associations and experiences were for social purposes just as relevant as the master narrative communicated by the collector and their narration stimulated by the objects that became source and illustration of the inexplicable to be explained.

Thus, the narrative forms an essential but non-visual component of the exhibition in the cabinets of curiosities. Next to references to natural and geographical discoveries, inventory lists such as the one by Robert Hubert reveal the persistence of particular narratives to explain the objects in the collection. The assembled artefacts stood "in a special relationship to the totality and, hence, offer[ed] a means of acquiring knowledge of, and privileged relation to, that totality" (Bennett 1995, 40-41). Yet it seems that their out-of-ordinary-status precisely does not communicate a common sense of the world but an anti-thesis to that sense of the world, not making a statement about the normal state but its very counterpart. In other words, the cabinets of curiosities secure normality by exhibiting difference.

Therefore, the exhibitions in the cabinets of curiosities referred to common discourses and master narratives, which were based on oppositions (and thus comparisons) to establish and confirm Christian European norms and precisely not encouraging alternative interpretations of the established world order. Objects of the non-European world exhibited in the European cabinets of curiosities, for example, had clearly been (pre)selected to support the European master narrative (and consequently did not offer opportunities to contradict it). For example, preferred among ethnographic objects from North America—that did not form an extra category of exhibition in the cabinets—were those that somehow opposed European culture, such as bows and arrows (opposing guns), wampum (opposing money), and woven baskets (opposing metal containers). Only those elements of everyday life that were easily comparable (and easily identifiable as primitive in European eyes) were selected (Calov 1969, 72). This narrative of progress is not immediately evident in curiosity displays. The objects are not related to each other in terms of a linear development towards advanced superiority. Nevertheless, by focusing on exceptions the cabinets of curiosities eventually helped to establish the natural sciences as fields of knowledge that categorize and institutionalize perception of the normal.

In addition to the objects documenting everyday life in other parts of the world, monstrosities of nature—perceived as unusual also in their places of origin—were displayed as signifiers of the exotic and the unknown (and thus transported the formerly mentioned objects of ubiquitous practices into that realm). John Winthrop Jr., for example, who collected in North America for the Royal Society in the 1660s, sent branches of oak trees that grew miniature acorns, a strange kind of fish, as he himself described it, and a "head of a deer which seems not an ordinary head" (cited in Collet 2007, 288) from North America to Great Britain. Thus, an exotic environment was created which put people, nature and objects (perceived as an undividable unity) into discourses of (unusual) environments illustrating variety by using exceptions. The idea of oppositions became crucial to pattern the world.

During the Renaissance, several descriptions of the New World inhabitants circulated, which all originated from a similar perspective and created the image of a singular culture defined by its "deficiencies" in comparison to the Europeans. To take the most obvious source, Christopher Columbus observed "no great diversity in the appearance of the people or in their manners and language. On the contrary, they all understand one another, which is a very curious thing," as he writes in a letter to King Ferdinand of Spain in 1493. Columbus, as many others, divided the New World population in biblical manner into Good and Evil. Whereas the first category comprised people described as friendly, helpful, modest, handsome and brave, the evil person was usually a lusty cannibal drawn to lechery and polygamy, dominated by superstition and human sacrifices—a fierce and unpredictable warrior.[8]

This bipolar approach to the world was interwoven with travel narratives, which were dominated by ideas of the exotic and did not necessarily correspond to the actual observations made. Yet there is an obsession with connecting and relating these kinds of writing to some sort of authentic experience, which is troubling in its way because it continues to hold within science the claim of truth. Dominik Collet, for example, explains how Caspar Schmalkalden, who travelled extensively for the Dutch West India Company in the mid-seventeenth century, described the non-European people he encountered in Brazil as heathens who practised polygamy. According to his travel reports, the women proudly exhibited their naked bodies, carried their babies on their backs and threw their breasts over their shoulders to nurse them. Children that were born dead were immediately eaten, Schmalkalden reports (Collet 2007, 105), which evokes the cannibal motif.

Clearly, non-European (imagined) customs were narrated in the cabinets as an inversion to European customs. This inversion was not only illustrated with objects from the quotidian sphere, but also (or more so) with objects of the category of *naturalia* like cashew nuts, manioc roots, or calabash that were part of the discourse of sinful life of non-European communities (ibid., 110-112). A spectacular example was the fruit of the Ahouvay tree, which was a popular collector's item for Europeans. It was rumoured that the fruit was used especially by vicious women to murder their husbands at the slightest suspicion of unfaithfulness (ibid., 250). Nature and culture became interchangeable and non-European communities clearly part of an untameable wilderness. This narrative also involves discourses of gender and Christianity that insisted on the female sex being closer to instinct and nature and thus more dangerous as well as endangered.

Fantastic tales such as these were a result of the impossibility to contextualize the artefacts or the lack of effort to do so. In most cases, the collectors did not come across the objects in contexts other than commodity exchange. They relied on dealers who made the objects available in the first place and thus purchased with the object a particular narrative (manufactured for sale). Objects that showed European influence and could not be included into the discourse of the non-European world were not collected. Clearly, the collections can only reflect the European imagination of non-European communities, constructing those as exotic (and therefore curious) entities of desire that ultimately reflected the collectors' longing. The cabinets of curiosities were not, as they were celebrated to be, a window into the world, but a mirror of Europe's elite (see also Collet 2007, 355), the microcosm of their imagination, and served to define the self as civilized in contrast to an abstract other, thus justifying a right to power claims and domination. Nevertheless, this postcolonial interpretation only becomes evident when the collections (as representations of discourse) experience a transition to the (natural) sciences. In Renaissance inventory lists, the fascination with the strange often involves admiration (and maybe envy) that gradually, but not necessarily, transforms into claims of superiority.

In the previous church collections an authoritarian claim was made by embedding the objects in the biblical narrative and turning them into relics: An inconspicuous piece of wood might stem from the holy cross, a piece of stone from the spot where Christ ascended to heaven, and a bone might be evidence of a particular saint or martyr. This way, the artefacts became commonly accessible and lent credibility to the events that they testified. In the cabinets of curiosities, a narrative of (scientific)

investigation replaced this religious narrative. Hubert's "bird of Paradise" is contextualized in categories of zoology and meteorology that seemingly help to solve—not merely accept—the mystery of its existence as a dead (and stuffed) specimen. Interestingly enough, this particular example explores the object already as a museum object, i.e. the pre-museum past of the objects remains obscure even in the explanation.

The curio then is a category inherent not to the object but established by its contextualization. This contextualization involves narratives to explain the previously unknown, the unfamiliar, or the extraordinary. The object then becomes the archive of the narrative. However, the void of the objects' pre-museum context remains. There is no information about its life before the curio category. Initially, all objects have the potential to be turned into curiosities by narratives, since curiosity "resists control, both as an appetite and as a material object," as Barbara Benedict writes (2001, 5). During the Renaissance, wonder and curiosity become conjoined twins. While wonder is always part of the extraordinary, it seems that curiosity, in its attempt to explain and rationalize (and thus dismiss the emotional value), tries to disguise wonder as a scientific category (devoid of emotional and subjective elements). Wonder had become despised during the age of Enlightenment. Emotionally overwhelming acceptance of the extraordinary is dismissed as ignorance and ultimately to be erased by rational (scientific) explanations. This interaction between curio and wonder is the point of departure for haunting when the exotic as an emotional category of marvel is always hauntingly present and yet suppressed by the narrative of science.

The Renaissance of the Cabinets

No cabinet of curiosity has survived throughout the centuries and only very few curio objects have been preserved. The Wunderkammer Olbricht in Berlin, a private collection, exhibits a selection of curio artefacts such as the neck and head of a giraffe, an anatomical model of an eye and a narwhal tusk (originally exhibited as the horn of a unicorn) from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Other cabinets have been reconstructed such as the *Kunst-* and *Wunderkammer* at Ambras Castle in Innsbruck (Austria), which originates in the sixteenth century, and the famous Green Vault in Dresden (Germany) still housing some of its eighteenth-century objects. Contemporary artists such as Mark Dion employ the cabinets of curiosities as a strategic chaos whose affect derives from the combination of extraordinary objects. David Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology (which has received particular attention after the