WONDER

INTRODUCTION BY
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Florida based artist, Sean Miller has for decades travelled to museums around the world collecting dust. This modest act of transgression calls into question where we, as a society, place our value, as the dust itself under Miller's re-purposing transforms from waste to valuable art/artifact. Additionally, the fact that dust was in the Museum in the first place questions spaces we often view as sanctimonious, pristine and without flaw. Like the fly in the ointment, Miller's dust reminds us of the impossibility of perfection in human generated ideas and places. Miller, also a curator and Founder/Director of the John Erickson Museum of Art, A Location Variable Museum, has organized exhibitions that question the role of museums in the social and political construction of knowledge about one-another, as well as the natural world.

Author Lawrence Weschler's book *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* (1995) explores the tradition of the "Wunderkammer" or Cabinet of Curiosities through the lens of artist David Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology. Weschler, akin to Miller and Wilson, is interested in the underlying politics of historic and contemporary museum displays, as natural history museums from Victorian times onwards have been monuments to discovery, feeding our natural sense of wonder and inquisitiveness. However such displays also delivered (and continue to) a specific way of seeing nature organized into hierarchies, reflecting the prominent socio-political ideologies of their time. As we currently find ourselves knee-deep in the largest biodiversity extinction event in human times, reevaluating our understanding and ways of looking at the natural world is a noble task.

On December 2nd, 2014, Lawrence Weschler visited University of Florida and the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art to present his lecture, "Art and Science as Parallel and Divergent Ways of Knowing" and to view the "Repurposing the Wunderkammer" exhibition. In turn, Miller visited Weschler at his upstate New York home in the spring of 2015 to conduct a discussion on the occasion of this publication. Their conversation as follows included such subjects as Wonder, Creases, Trickster-ism, Hypothetical Art, Perception, Mobility, Museums, Termites and a few of the projects in the Wunderkammer exhibition.

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SEAN MILLER
IN CONVERSATION WITH
LAWRENCE WESCHLER

LW (Lawrence Weschler): Years ago, when I was writing about the Museum of Jurassic Technology, the impulse was to think of it as a classic postmodern institution, calling into question all of the givens of museumship and of authority, and doing all the good postmodern moves: *Why do we believe what is on a wall label? What does this lighting do to our belief? How do we establish what is, in fact, worthy of being looked at? But then, also, how do we undercut that?* All that slippage seems to be postmodern. But David Wilson, the founder of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, had a brilliant insight. He was, in fact, tapping into the premodern roots of the postmodern, because this temper that we are now in, postmodernism, oddly enough, is a little bit similar to that of the premodern time period. Which is similar to why grandparents and grandchildren love each other: They have common enemies.

In the same way, the modern world, Descartes and after, rose up in revulsion against the earlier Temper of Wonder. The modern world was saying, *This is stupid, these are a bunch of cranks…. We have to have some rigor here, get some categories established, this is crazy. It isn't the case that twin carrots and Siamese twins have anything in common. Let's get some categories set up. Just because something makes you drop your jaw in amazement and causes a flutter in your heart doesn't mean that it's in fact true.*

***There are all kinds of quacks taking advantage of you. Science isn't going to be like that!* This was a huge counter-wave against what we call the Age of Marvel, the Age of Wonder, and, in some ways, it in turn overstepped its own bounds. Postmodernism says, *Well, yes, but not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that is counted counts*.**

Tom Eisner, the great entomologist, says that what Wilson was capturing with the Museum of Jurassic Technology was that incredibly wonderful moment in scientific hypothesis that occurs when you first find there is something odd. The great fun is just wildly letting your mind go and thinking up all the possible hypotheses, no matter how far-fetched. Then, eventually, alas, you have to go and nail it down, and some of the hypotheses fall away. What he is talking about there is, in fact, the premodern roots of scientific sensibility.

The contemporary upsurge of Mark Dion's work, for instance, addresses the hankering for a more holistic and existentially vivid approach in a world where scientists are stuck in extremely narrow silos of research. It is the part of us that doesn't want to be reduced to genetic code, sociological push/pull, and to Pavlovian desires—the part that wants to be addressed more individually. Wonder, interestingly, is something that only people can experience individually: computers cannot and nor can sociological groupings.

SM (Sean Miller): Descartes only valued the state of wonder to the extent that it sparked some kind of further learning or action. On the other hand, contemporary society is filled with opportunities to see and learn things that, in the Age of Wonder, had been confined to private collections and esoteric scholarly writing. Now museums have websites and online video series. There is YouTube, social media, and so many other virtual sources for curious facts, for scientific and natural wonders in our information-rich society. Are we living in an age where the general public lives in a perpetual state of wonder? If so, are we simply dumbfounded by it or are we putting any of it to good use?

LW: Yes. I would say that it's dialectical. You can go overboard and hope that one's children then will go back the other way, perhaps. Although my daughter is constantly saying, Is this for real or are you just in one of your wonder moments?

In any case, I would say, absolutely. By the way, it's not only wonder or non-wonder. There are other kinds of things. The Internet is precisely a kind of a Pavlovian channeling of quote, wonder end quote. When something online garners ninety million hits, it is not entirely clear to me how to quantify this sheer number of people whose eyeballs have been engaged in

a Pavlovian commercial transaction. Maybe the transaction yielded x amount of money and was shared on x amount of channels, but, at that point, it's not entirely clear to me that it hasn't drifted in the other direction from that of wonder.

SM: Yes. There is the notion that the Internet has allowed for information to move before us as an endless, virtual cabinet of wonder, but I agree it also has the potential to make the very category of the wondrous things banal. The all-at-once, tactile physicality of an actual cabinet present right there before you, by contrast, gives it a certain kind of distinction over the virtual. An individual, real-life exposure to curious objects and information seems important in order to experience wonder in contemporary life.

LW: Wonder is the thing that happens primordially and fundamentally, and it simply addresses you as an individual. It catches you up short in what is the biggest wonder of all, the idea that you perceive anything and that this tiny planet exists for any reason at all today, I'm having this experience, what the hell is that about? All these other wonders are just kind of occasions for, instances of, the big wonder. Whereas the sort of thing that is happening to ninety million people simultaneously. I'm not quite sure what that is.

SM: You have written about the state of wonder, and it has been described many different ways: a shock, a physical sensation, and the heart being aflutter.…

LW: I often call it a Pillow of Air, referencing the pillow of air that gets lodged in your mouth for ten seconds at certain moments of astonishment, and you notice that you haven't even breathed.

SM: It is clearly a transformative experience. In *Hyperallergic*, there was an article by Allison Meier titled, *Neuroaesthetic Research Probe Finds Link Between Art, Perception, and the Self*. I wanted to share it with you. It discusses this research paper in *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, by Edward Vessel at NYU. Researchers are studying the default mode network (DMN) area in the brain. Evidently, this DMN area is responsible for one's understanding of "the self." As I understand it, they discovered that, when an individual views art with which he or she strongly identifies, there is significantly increased activity in the DMN. On a day-to-day basis and in everyday life, the DMN part of the brain isn't very active, but evidently the high rate of brain activity in the DMN when viewing art has sparked theories that certain artworks might impact individuals in a very direct and meaningful way. The idea is that an individual's conception of "the self" may change directly as a result of his or her experience with certain artworks.

To me, this is fun to think about because it really does away with the idea of the passive art audience, right? One walks into a certain exhibition, or encounters a cabinet of wonder, and emerges as a subtly different person. Maybe this direct response somehow relates to the state of wonder.

LW: That is funny. It feels to me like one of those instances of that whole comedy of both neuroscience and sociology, basically quantifying the obvious.

[laughter]

I am reminded of the sociologist Richard Sennett and writer Malcolm Gladwell. I was at a lecture that Richard Sennett was giving, and he was quoting this ridiculous scientific paper, which Gladwell has now gone to town with. This paper stated that in *any* field, be it plumbing or classical piano or high art… in *any* field, it takes 10,000 hours of practice before you can become a master. The paper claimed this to be true of *every single field*. I remember turning to the person sitting next to me and saying, "You just know that the sociologist who came up with that idea had not been working at sociology for 10,000 hours."

[laughter]

LW: First of all, we're very much in the land of "as if." I mean we are talking about the brain as if it has centers that could be turned on or turned off. That is not what is happening. Alva Noë, the author of *Out of Our Heads*, is a philosopher of consciousness and offers an interesting critique of neuroscience. He says the first thing to understand is that mind isn't taking place in our skulls. Mind, by definition, is taking place in the world. This whole notion that there's brain activity that is generating our sense of the world … no, no, no, we are in fact engaged, in much the same way that light is coming into our retinas, while simultaneously, in a larger sense, our body and our attention is going out. There is a dialectical thing going on. Mind is never inside our brains. Mind is out, floating around out of curiosity. For all of the razzle-dazzle of neuroscience, they are not one iota closer to solving the brain-mind problem than they were 25,000 years ago. I am sure that cavemen thought about it, too. All this quantifying and so forth of what's happening in this little gray Jell-O sponge we have in our heads doesn't account for what thoughts feel like. And, parenthetically, wonder short-circuits that. So the fantasy of coming up with the neuroscientific answer for what "wonder" is or where it's working in the brain, I mean, it's fine, why not? But…

SM: In her *Art21* interview, Ann Hamilton describes the way she visualizes and plans her work. She says, *I know, when I'm making work, there's a point where I can't see it … I can't see it in my head, and then there's that moment where you can see it, and you think that might be beautiful, and it bites you, and then you will go to all ends to see it in fact.* This description interested me in terms of curiosity and wonder because she is discussing a process of hypothetical thinking and considering possibilities in terms of art production. Clearly, this curiosity and longing for answers exists in the arts *and* sciences. I love that she says the idea bites you as related to a transformative ah-ha moment. Carl Sagan seemed to be hinting at a similar longing for answers when he stated, *Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known.*

LW: Sure. I believe that, at the edges of disciplines, people are talking and bumping into each other. It is much more interesting to me to discuss this sort of thing as a way of talking about the relationship between art and science than locating an art node in the brain. Nabokov, the great butterfly scientist, tells us that the true master is not somebody who needs 10,000 hours of practice. Rather, *the true master combines the precision of the poet and the imagination of the scientist.* Which is such a fantastic and counterintuitive line. I think he is right. Scientists tend to discount the amount of absolute care and precision that a poet or an artist lavishes on his work, and, in very much the same way, artists pretend to think that science is not an imaginative activity. I think science is extremely imaginative, that the actual activity of science is extremely imaginative and that there *is* a crossover there, but many if not most scientists are so afraid of being accused of being imaginative (which gets cast as the opposite of rigorous or even true) that they strip away all the *imaginative* as they move along.

SM: The fields are similar though in many rudimentary ways. In a broad sense, the practice of accumulating, classifying, comparing, scrutinizing, measuring, documenting, and defining objects is shared in both fields. It is interesting to consider how scientists and artists might collectively compare their skills and processes of perception and observation. For instance, the process of drawing or painting demands careful scrutiny and a great many methods of measuring, cross-referencing, and classifying. A painter may spend hours doing a certain amount of brush strokes, cover them up, and decide to go with a totally new configuration. A staggering amount of decisions are being made about where things need to go and how things need to relate before a piece is finished.

LW: A great project would be a required class for all science and humanities people together to study epistemology. Just how do we know what we know? What do we mean when we say we know something? How is it different than

believing something? How is it different than valuing something? Those kinds of categories would allow everybody to enter the room at the same level. No matter what kind of expertise they had, they would be awash in mystery. And that would be fine, you know? What would happen in a class like that when an artist would say, *I know that is right. That's the solution?* What do you mean when you say, That's the solution?

Mark Dion is surely playing with that. When you have a cabinet and you put things in different orders, it is absolutely playing epistemological games, which are great. Another area we can talk about is play, which is serious fun, and having things in play. What is in play when things are in play? And what is *happening* to them when they are in play? That goes back to the Ann Hamilton quote. There's a moment, for example, when I'm playing sudoku or KenKen where it's completely unclear, and then suddenly you feel it, everything just clicks into shape. That is what an artist feels and something that the scientist feels. They both know that moment.

SM: Yes, play is really important to creative production. This project I did with the Florida Museum of Natural History and the Harn, *Communibus Locis Interpretive Foundation: Last Whole Earth Cabinet*, included the *Fluxus Codex* book as part of the cabinet of wonder. Play is really important to the Fluxus movement and so are ideas of games, kits, archives, and found objects.

One of the originators of Fluxus, Ben Patterson, is in the *Repurposing the Wunderkammer* exhibition, and we were talking about play and "goofing off." Years ago, Allan Kaprow made a dismissive comment about Fluxus artists by stating, *It is my impression that many people just simply goof off and pretend.… When I asked Ben for a response to this, he said, Well, goofing off is one way to not get too serious about yourself. That is one thing. One of the cultural critiques of Fluxus was that there were these grand masters like Stockhausen and Joseph Beuys, and they knew it all and could do everything. So, in a sense, our approach helped us keep our feet on the ground, so to speak, and it could be fun, of course, too. So there is no problem with that*. I enjoyed this response because the idea of a lack of pretense, the idea of fun, amusement, and the notion that you are not a know-it-all seems to be valuable in observation, information-gathering, and in the creative act. This idea extends beyond artists talking about goofing off. There is serious value in play. It is also interesting to consider the Fluxus approach as play in terms of the imaginative and direct way they work with language, mundane objects, and materials.

LW: So, for example?

SM: Fluxus artist George Brecht, whose first career, incidentally, was that of a chemist, created a series of instructional "score cards" that were collectively called *Water Yam*. The idea is that the cards describe a series of actions and found objects to viewers and the viewers complete the work. One card says,

Chair Event

on a white chair

a grater
tape measure
alphabet
flag
black
and spectral colors

That's it. We can create *Chair Event* now if we source those items. In a sense, the chair becomes an impromptu cabinet, stage, or exhibition space. The objects must be spontaneously collected, considered, and arranged. It also forces participants to regard the objects and puzzle over them for some period of time, and afterwards—one might say, *What just happened here? How do I classify these objects and this event…*

LW: I'd go to a different direction. I'd go toward the direction of *Who the fuck are you to tell me what to do?*

SM: [laughing]

Well, there is that, too.

LW: To say that this is a legitimate form of whatever you're saying it is—Brecht is obviously playing with that and with games of authority. I say, *You get paid for this?* That question is one I have of certain scientists too—*You get paid for poking and prodding mice and flashing lights in their faces?*

Who died and elected you Pope?

SM: George Brecht is definitely playing with ideas of power and our preconceptions concerning what should be considered art versus everyday life. He is walking that line, it seems. For this work, his job is done once he has written his scorecard. He usually isn't around to validate the work, and there are really no further instructions, so, for instance, a participant could meaningfully and creatively misinterpret his instructions. The Fluxus artists sometimes do this with each other's works as well. Let me read one more Brecht piece, *Two Exercises from Water Yam*, 1972. The scorecard says:

Consider an object. Call what is not the object "other."

Exercise: Add to the object, from the "other," another object, to form a new object and a new "other." Repeat until there is no more "other."

Exercise: Take part of the object and add it to the "other," to form a new object and a new "other." Repeat until there is no more object.

LW: Oh, it's fun. I mean, there you're tending into Zen-master territory. That's wonderful. I mean, I love that, and it partakes in the spirit of play that got us into this.

SM: Exactly. Obviously there are a lot more contemporary artists, like Oliver Herring, Miranda July, and Erwin Wurm, who use similar strategies.

LW: I particularly enjoy, as you know, people who create mind games and play on institutions of power. The artist J. S. G. Boggs, for example, is really interesting to me. You have got a guy that effectively goes into a bank and once again says, *Who elected you Pope? I can be a bank, too. Why am I not a bank?*

SM: Right. He is prolific. My favorite is his Florida Fun Money. The orange hundred-dollar bills he creates that, like his other work, start getting passed around as if actual US currency.

LW: All kinds of things happen when you ask those types of basic questions. I treasure this subversive approach, and that's one of the things I'm evaluating with these sorts of projects and deciding what makes one project better or worse. It is precisely that Socratic subversive thing that happens. I enjoy that.

SM: I agree. Founding and operating the John Erickson Museum of Art (JEMA) myself for the last eleven years is one of the ways I have been exploring that terrain in the field of art. A miniature, location-variable museum that resides in a series of carrying cases is able to effectively open travelling exhibitions almost anywhere. The exhibitions may be invited or completely guerilla in nature. The project remains engaging to me because it is a generative work and because the authorship gets shared as different artists collaborate with the museum. In addition, the roles of curator and the artist also merge. These ideas also inform my *Communibus Locis Interpretive Foundation* (CLIF) cabinets. I create an institutional guise and collaborate with other individuals and institutions. It opens up a platform for a lot of voices and activity. It is a benefit to working this way.

LW: An added value, as Marx would say.

SM: Yes, and, in the case of CLIF, valuable because the objects displayed in a cabinet of wonder gain significance in varied ways. I noticed the items I was working with could be alternatively viewed as: specimens, artifacts, tools/devices, art objects, found objects/readymades, commodity items, or objects belonging to a larger archive. Some objects obviously fit into several of the categories

simultaneously. Sometimes insights regarding the objects and their categories would occur in the process of sourcing the works. If I couldn't borrow a specimen from the museum, I would wonder, *How could I myself get one of these, would it be ethical, what would it cost?* Simultaneously, I'm considering the objects' conceptual and aesthetic significance. I'm also keenly aware that many people coming out of the sciences will view the exhibition, and those are people accustomed to carefully scrutinizing and studying these objects for very different reasons. It makes one consider an object's significance and value in so many different ways.

LW: On the subject of monetary value, I always say that any art object is somewhere between priceless and worthless, and anything else you can say about any specific object at any specific time in that regard is comedy. I mean the actual money value assigned to a work is just a comedic moment in time. By the way, we have been speaking about Dada, Fluxus, and so forth as these transformative art movements. Basically, they all partake in *tricksterism*.

SM: Right.

LW: That's the thing that goes all the way back. The trickster is Paleolithic. There have always been tricksters. In Europe, they filled the role of the king's joker, but think as well of Rabelais or Falstaff, Till Eulenspiegel or Peter Pan. There's a very important place for that type of individual, going all the way back. On the one hand, we can talk about the premodern, the modern, and the postmodern, but, on the other hand, trickster-ism runs all the way through.

SM: Good point. The trickster often solves a lot of problems within a community, and then they cause problems, too, but their existence is somehow necessary.

LW: I sometimes think about it this way. Would it be possible for there ever to be a day without wind anywhere? And the answer is no. If you wrapped the earth in a skin of atmosphere, or if you wrapped a sphere with something flat, say a piece of paper, to wrap it this way, you have to create creases. It is mathematically impossible not to. And it is in the creases that the wind starts happening. And in a way, that's what trickster-ism is. Trickster-ism is the creases in the social order. When you can't smother something completely, that is where the creases start happening.

SM: Or maybe tricksters are the people that get caught in the creases and have to respond.

LW: Both. I mean, both—why did you become a trickster? The crease is there as a necessary part. Any total system has creases, and there are people who are made uncomfortable by the creases. There is a special kind of OCD that can't stand creases. Conversely, there is a special kind of OCD that can't stand evenness. That's what dialectics is for.

SM: There is a photograph I want to show you. As an artist-in-residence with the Florida Museum of Natural History, I came across many specimens and objects that seemed so compelling—they were like readymades. I thought to myself, *How do I improve on this?* The first creative impulse when visiting the collections was to photograph specimens. I wanted to isolate and "frame" these items through the medium of photography. This way I could slow down, study them, and share them. It was a point of access to understanding the collection. The downside was that the photos were not art—just documentation. However, this termite photograph I was quite pleased with. It was different. The specimen was pulled from the wood ceiling of an actual art gallery. This is clearly a microscopic close-up, but also, to me, it is some kind of a post-mortem-photo-mug-shot-type image. This creature lived its whole life on Earth eating a gallery and feeding off the art world.

LW: Oh! Mm-hmm—an outlaw—or more of an artist than any of us?

SM: Certainly a criminal artist, and clearly a fan of the process of reductive sculpture.

LW: That's a terrific piece, and that is a good example of the way any work arises in a context of explanation. This drives Bob Irwin crazy. Even one of his rooms that doesn't have anything going on in it arises, I would argue (and do argue so with him) in a context of a critique of rooms that do have things going on in them. My relationship with Bob Irwin is such that he is constantly saying to me (especially when I say things like that), *Shut the fuck up! Can't you just look at it without association?* And the answer is, *No!*—and you can't. He says, *Yes, you can. I'm doing that. And I would say, A.) Well, you've trained yourself to do that as part of a completely bizarre 80-year-long discipline and B.) You still didn't succeed.* He just becomes furious.

[Laughter]

SM: That is a tall order.

LW: But in this case, that is a really boring-looking termite *until you tell that story*. The minute you tell that story—it becomes interesting, it becomes worthy of interest (as opposed to all the other boring termites, excuse the pun). But you can flip that formulation, because any termite can be looked at from the point of view of being fascinating: The embodiment of a lifetime of eating wood (of boring through wood, if you will), and it looks like this! Everything has the potential to be dazzling when *looked at in the right way*, and in some senses that is what art is. It is a way of nudging us toward being able to look at things in their particularity. By the way, that's a really fun piece.

SM: Another arguably subversive work is Eugene Parnell's Macho. It is a sculpture: installment "M" from his *Charismatic Megafauna* series. It depicts a life-size mandrill, a relative of the baboon, sitting on a significantly large pile of actual *National Geographic* magazines, masturbating. Geography, naturalism, animal behavior, and coffee table magazines converge to call into question the way(s) cultural institutions and the public harbor certain fears and desires related to their own place in the animal world. By doing it *wrong*, Eugene Parnell is inventing a scenario where nature runs its course despite the "library" of written materials that surround it.

LW: Yes. It's fun, and I like that piece, too. The shrieking monkey on top of all the *National Geographics*, and my first response went to all the arguments about primitivism and the treatment of people historically in journals and books like *National Geographic*. What did it mean that certain human beings were displayed alongside monkeys and sharks, whereas other people might not be displayed that way. In more recent years, *National Geographic* would go to places like Edmonton, Canada, so now it demonstrates it treats everybody that way. But, yeah, *Macho* is a fun piece.

SM: I like it, too, because, although created from vintage fur coats, it really looks like an actual taxidermy specimen and a genuine taxidermy tableau scene presented at any natural history museum, but it is not behaving or performing correctly. It is subversive in that, once you see it, it calls into question all the decisions that were made with all these other displays you have viewed, or, for that matter, the coverage and content for *National Geographic*.

LW: Except the *National Geographic* was in fact famously the occasion for much 1950s and 1960s masturbation. Today, kids would not understand that. There was a time when that was the only place one could see breasts in a magazine unless you got a *Playboy*. The difference was *National Geographic* was *educational*, so you could get away with it.

[laughter]

SM: Andrew Yang's *The Finding of Falling and Floating* offers a museum display case containing a curious mix of items from the natural history museum's collections, ceramic objects, and found objects. Meteorites, bird eggs, sea stars, fossilized sea stars, and his imposter ceramic works all

coexist in the display. A self-published handout zine provides an itemized index. He is intentionally and poetically playing with the way we cross-reference his objects. How do you compare a starfish and a meteorite? What happens when a seabird egg looks like a meteorite? The birds may fly long distances to lay their eggs, so, in a sense, their eggs come out of the sky. What do sea stars have to do with the sky? A system of relatedness has been built between objects that may not readily invite comparison.

LW: One question this kind of work raises is that there are people who do this with no intention of display. We call them hoarders, and the flip side is that hoarders are a certain kind of artist. What is the threshold that gets crossed when this activity goes from being a private compulsion to a public display and the declaration that this is now art?

SM: When Andy came to University of Florida, he presented a lecture and workshop. Being both an artist and a scientist, his workshop was interesting because he encouraged our art students to classify objects. Prior to the class, students were instructed to each bring two compelling objects to class. Upon arrival, they broke into groups, combined objects, and each group began to sort and classify their eclectic pile of stuff. The exercise demanded that each group invent their own systems of classification. The passionate debates and discussions that ensued were quite interesting.

LW: This is an art that is reverse engineering what happened as the Age of Wonder became the Age of Science. Now that we are deep into the Age of Science, he is taking all the technology, rigor, and the techniques of science and applying them to randomness—which is fun!

SM: There is a fun arbitrariness to it because you're not sure what his line of inquiry is in relation to his collection. You're also not sure if the objects are authentic objects or not. Some of the meteorites look like ceramics. Some are his ceramics. He included an eggshell from his breakfast the morning he installed the work. He is confounding the viewers' attempts to understand the collection as a whole but also engaging them with his unconventional approach to collecting and art production.

LW: If this had been in a wonder cabinet from the seventeenth century, that would have been the way they would have done it, and there was a very long, complicated march out of that way of doing it to get to science. Now, from the peak of the Age of Science, he is getting on a toboggan and going down the other way—*wheee!*

[laughter]

SM: This loops back to our discussion about play. When you talk about the contemporary scientists being in narrow silos of research, then it follows that something useful resides in his approach. The ability to look broadly over things and play with classification systems is valuable.

LW: Sure. Absolutely! I agree. When I became the Director for the Institute of the Humanities at NYU, I insisted that I would do that only if it was understood that the sciences are a part of the humanities. Sciences *versus* humanities …? No. The sciences are one of the great flowerings of the humanities, and, conversely, the humanities can be of great service to the sciences to the extent that they help them remember that.

SM: Let's discuss the Art Guys' work *No Cigar*. This piece features an old-style glass dome shade, containing inside two wineglasses and a hygro-thermometer. The objects are sealed in and protected by the glass dome, but there's a break in the back of the glass dome that is conspicuously repaired. There is literally no cigar in the work. I thought it was a clever addition to the exhibition.

LW: How so?

SM: It goes back to what we were talking about and the ways one perceives, displays, and classifies objects. The glass dome seals everything in. You get nothing. There's nothing in the glasses, and they are nonfunctional in relation to their expected usage. What is their new function? How do we use them now? Like everything that is put in the cabinet or put on display, it…

LW: It's taken out of circulation.

SM: It's taken out of circulation and put up on the shelf (or pedestal) and carefully monitored, covered, and protected for posterity. Rachel Poliquin, in *The Breathless Zoo*, writes that *wonders were turbulent, category-shattering, awe-inspiring, intoxicating objects…*. This is a fun quote to consider in relation to this work. Is this *No Cigar* an object of wonder or not?

LW: Because it's shattered?

[laughter]

Some of the associations I had with this piece involve smoke and mirrors and that "no cigar" implies *Where's the smoke?* If there's smoke, there must be fire, and if there's no fire, there is no smoke, but, on the other hand, the transparency of the whole thing, it is glass on top of glass. A pair of glasses implies a whole set of things about vision, what you look through, and so you know I agree with you. It's very smart, very funny, and yes, the hygro-thermometer there at the bottom is perfect. It just adds to the whole kind of mock-scientific lineup. Those two Art Guys are a pair of tricksters for sure.

SM: Speaking of tricksters, while preparing my work for this exhibition, I enjoyed researching Charles Willson Peale. Despite his being a great artist and a curator, I was interested in him as a trickster as well. The way he approached his museum and his daily life. Susan Stewart writes about Peale, stating, *As early as 1787, Peale had placed a life-sized wax figure of himself in his museum as a way of fooling the public into assuming his presence there. And there are other accounts of Peale traveling through Maryland in a carriage harnessed simultaneously with living horses and stuffed fawns as well as several other taxidermic specimens. In his [Peale's] autobiography, he reported this "excited much curiosity along the road."*

In the late 1500s, the poet Francesco Patrizi listed twelve categories of the potential ways to evoke wonder. Some of those included: novelty, paradox, augmentation, the extra-natural, great utility, the very precise, the unexpected, and the sudden. It interests me how Peale's carriage may have functioned as a delivery system for wonder. In a larger sense, it speaks to the ways audiences encounter exhibitions. In part, this sparked my interest in producing these mobile bicycle trailer units as part of my *Communibus Locis Interpretive Foundation* (CLIF). The *CLIF: Mobile Wunderkammer* in the exhibition offers a miniature wunderkammer on wheels. Cabinets of curiosity may occupy massive spaces with abundant collections, but the miniature has also always been a part of that tradition. What wonder might be inspired by the world of small things and unexpected audience engagement? This relates to the gesture or expressiveness of a collection.

LW: There are a whole group of artists who wish this could be done. They are trying to figure out how to get the art out of the museum and take it on the road. Things like that are their own kind of fun. They create slippage in the world because you wonder what this guy is doing. Is he crazy? What category am I dealing with here? A nut? Con man? Nigerian prince? What exactly is going on? What this does, for people who are confronted with it in the world, is that it in effect makes them build the museum with which to continue the experience. If they went to a museum, it would already be built for them, but they get to observe themselves setting up the epistemological context to understand what's happening. That's kind of fun to watch in itself.

SM: Yes. I enjoy the phenomenon of that slippage, with the John Erickson Museum of Art (JEMA) project, but JEMA is about contemporary art and the contemporary museum.

LW: Of course—sure.

SM: Lately, I am almost inspired more by earlier historical periods, but I always am interested in discussing these ideas. How does the museum frame the work or frame a viewer's understanding and experience of the work? Can the institution be cut from the equation and replaced with a DIY approach to exhibiting art and science? By removing the institution, how does that change the dialogue, perception, and experience of those involved?

LW: Yes. It is fun to see those projects of yours in the context of just having gone to the multimillion-, gazillion-dollar new Whitney, which incidentally is very beautiful. I like it a lot.

SM: Lament for the Bees from *Amhrán na mBeach (Song of the Bees)* is a Sound Art and Social Practice project by the collaborative team Softday, the artists Mikael Fernstrom and Sean Taylor. Softday used statistics of bee population decline in Ireland to create a musical score and public performance. The music here [playing music] was from their collaboration with Glenstal Abbey in Ireland. The monks at Glenstal Abbey raise bees. The music was generated through Softday's collaboration with singing monks, bee data specialists, the Irish Chamber Orchestra, and the bees themselves.

LW: The buzz is from their recordings or found audio?

SM: They record the bees, but also the bees were actually present in the abbey for the performance. They had a special sculptural hive in the performance, so some of the bee sounds may have been live.

LW: I wonder whether chants originated from human response to bee-buzzing. Or, if not bee-buzzing, bird-singing. There's a feedback loop going on there. The extinction or the collapse of the bees at the point when we ourselves are worried about the collapse of ourselves: it's powerful.

SM: This Softday project was important to the exhibition because, when I first heard this work, it was very startling. The piece definitely impacted me with a sense of wonder. It was like hearing music from another planet. It is significant for this exhibition because it is built upon a combination of scientific research, Christian iconography, invention, and an interest in the natural world that seemed to place it firmly within the realms of the old cabinets of wonder.

Ben Patterson referenced a more recent display technique related to medicine with his performance at the Harn Museum titled *Dr. Ben's Fluxus Medicine Show*. Dressed in a lab coat, he enacted different classic Fluxus performances after hooking members of the audience to some very suspect, handmade head-scanning equipment and a computer. Purportedly, he was measuring brainwaves. He analyzed his audience for blockages and offered *Dr. Ben's Fluxus Elixir* for those that were ailing. It was fantastic.

Ben Patterson did another performance we videotaped to be included in the exhibition. *Tristan and Isolde: The Gatorglory Production* was a new version of his classic performance Lick Piece. In the new version, he inflates a life-sized inflatable alligator with a bicycle pump while accompanied by opera music. Once it was inflated, he covered the alligator with whipped cream, nuts, and cherries. At the end of the performance, he invites the audience onstage to personally remove the toppings. In the original version, the inflatable alligator would have been replaced with an actual nude woman. I liked the newer version in the context of this show. Having an alligator fetishized in the performance, paired with this image of him working away on preparing the inflatable alligator, and blurred the lines between chef, musician, and taxidermist. You know, the alligator or crocodile held such a place of reverence in many of these early collections. It just seemed perfect.

LW: Alexander Melamid does something similar to Patterson's Medicine Show where he suggests that exposure to particular paintings is good for treating particular illnesses; he then gives you a map of the Metropolitan Museum and tells you which part of the museum cures different ailments. He says, *So this part is very good for feet problems, this part is very good for another ailment.* It is part of his whole art and medicine project. He will also advise that if you have a sore backache and project an image of Van Gogh onto your back for several hours, then that treatment is really good for it. It's really crazy, wonderful stuff.

SM: In that spirit, I want to share my new JEMA *Viewer Legitimacy Cards*, but really you may use them for any museum. Before you attend an exhibition, you should answer these personal questions about your recent sleep, dietary habits, state of mind, and personal wellbeing, coupled with questions about your physical condition, background, and other relevant factors that might impact your anticipated viewing experience. The cards establish your ability to be an effective and legitimate viewer. I'm still perfecting a way to interpret the results, but the idea is that some viewers are more legitimate than others. Museums regularly do attendance counts, but they could be drastically improved.

For instance, I was reading this article that mentioned that when you are viewing art, a similar part of your brain is activated as when you're in love. See, on the Viewer Legitimacy Card, it asks, *15. Are you in love with anyone here today?* It would help the brain do its job, being in love with someone while viewing the art.

LW: Unless that person was jealous.

[laughter]

SM: There are so many variables…

LW: Those things are just crazy. This is coming full circle, and maybe we end on this. The difference between this piece of paper being done by an artist or being done by a sociologist or a scientist is the essence of why I accept it this way but I wouldn't accept it any other way. This ironizes itself as you look at it.

On the other hand, the scientists do have a point when they say, *Are you going to be taking the train in a few minutes? Do you trust the train?*

SM: We did coming here, and will again when we leave.

LW: And there are in fact certain Newtonian laws that exist and certain measurements that had to have been made, if you were going to have any degree of confidence taking that next train.

On the third hand, though, you do need artists to puncture the dead and otherwise deadening certainties of wherever the train goes.

SM: Yes, I know, but I actually do need to go catch that train.