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The Museum of Jurassic Technology:  
Wonder, Satire, and a Pinch of Sweet Madness

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## Introduction:

When in Culver City, West Los Angeles, you might come across an intriguing storefront. Lodged between a yoga centre and a Thai restaurant, there stands the Museum of Jurassic Technology. Maybe you have read about it, or maybe someone has recommended it to you. “But what is it about?” you asked, “You’ll see!” retorted your interlocutor, laconically. Or perhaps you are just here by chance, and, feeling adventurous, decide to wander inside. From the busy boulevard flooded by the scorching Californian sun, you find refuge in a dimly lit space, its prevailing silence hardly troubled by the pedantic voices originating from some of the installations on display. A place unlike any other, the Museum of Jurassic Technology (MJT) was born from the mind of David Hildebrand Wilson, a curator, collector, conservator and McArthur genius grant recipient who had previously worked on creating special effects for the cinema industry. The name itself instils mystery, as two words could not be more antithetical than “Jurassic” and “Technology”. Upon entering, a slideshow presents the MJT as an “educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic”, and a long, well-informed historical narrative treating of the origin of museums cites it as a legitimate heir to the museological tradition. Every element is there to evoke the usual museum language: finely designed dioramas, display cases with lightings conscientiously studied to highlight their content, labelling and endless paragraphs of explanation, and even a case adorned with a sign that reads “Out of order”. Yet, when ambling through the carefully curated galleries, the visitors quickly come to realize something is wrong. They successively come across a horn of supposedly human origin, a specimen of an ant controlled by a parasite, a display dedicated to the tragic story of a forgotten and, ironically enough, amnesiac opera singer, a block of lead allegedly containing a bat specimen capable of penetrating solid objects, and a hall dedicated to the bizarre works and theories of 17<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit and humanist Athanasius Kircher, amongst a myriad of other curiosities. The strength of the Museum of Jurassic Technology resides in this that the actual facts presented are incongruous enough to engender doubt and curiosity in the visitor’s mind, and the made up elements are just convincing enough to appear authentic. As demonstrated by Lawrence Weschler in his book *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder: Pronged Ants, Horned Humans, Mice on Toast, and Other Marvels of Jurassic Technology*, humans bearing a sort of “horn” have indeed existed, and instances of ants being “brainwashed” by a certain type of parasite are

common throughout the natural world.<sup>1</sup> The bat is obviously a hoax, but one supported by scientific evidence seemingly so reliable they almost become legitimate. A well informed viewer would be aware of the historical authenticity of Kircher and the multitude of projects he dedicated his life to, yet in the peculiar context of the MJT, they might come to doubt of their own knowledge. The succession of oddities makes its visit incredibly unsettling, a “mixture of shock, marvel, delight and confusion” for the viewer.<sup>2</sup> To enter the Museum of Jurassic Technology is to dive deep into a heterotopia where the notions of factual and fictional dissolve into one another. At once a modern cabinet of curiosity and an elaborate mockery of museums as an all-knowing institution, the MJT is a deeply poetic space. The exhibitions are scientific, historical and artistic, creating an enigmatic mismatch that either ravishes or disorients its viewers.

This dissertation will aim to treat simultaneously of the marvellous and critical aspects of the Museum of Jurassic Technology. In order to do so, the first chapter will examine the generation of wonder in the MJT and the institution’s kinship with early cabinets of curiosity. The second chapter will treat of the MJT as an institutional critique satirising museum authority. Finally, the third chapter will approach the rarely examined topic of the MJT’s audience. This museum presenting a wide array of exhibitions, it would be impossible to treat of all of them extensively. For the sake of its argument, then, this dissertation will focus primarily on four of them: the *Deprong Mori*, the *Delani/Sonnabend Halls*, *Athanasius Kircher: The World is Bound By Secret Knots* and the *Fruit-stone carving* exhibit.

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder: Pronged Ants, Horned Humans, Mice on Toast, and Other Marvels of Jurassic Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Edward Rothstein, “Where Outlandish meets Landish,” *The New York Times*, January 9, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/10/arts/design/museum-of-jurassic-technology-shows-its-wild-side-review.html>.

## Chapter 1 : Constructing Wonder

Museums as we know them today are recent inventions. Originally signifying “Temple of the Muses,” the word designated a space that would instill inspiration and a certain spiritual growth to whoever visited them. It is only in the late Renaissance, with the advent of Cabinets of Wonder, or *Wunderkammern*, that appeared the first embryos of modern museums. These early cabinets consisted in rooms or studies in which owners presented their collection of wondrous natural specimens, exotic artefacts and other man-made feats of genius. As Susan Crane has argued, *wunderkammerns* embodied “the plenitude of the world represented in the microcosm of a single room or space.”<sup>3</sup> The word “wonder” was evocative of both the exotic and mysterious objects that were displayed and the feeling they provoked in the viewer. Often obeying to no classification whatsoever and presented in a glorious mess, these collections were generally displayed according to the subjective taste of their owner. Few were those fortunate enough to penetrate these wondrous universes, for they were private and often belonged to highly-ranked individuals. Signs of a well-traveled, well-read man, these early cabinets were at once a demonstration of power and an act of religious devotion for their owners, as, whatever was displayed, these were the Wonder of God.<sup>4</sup> By the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, curiosity cabinets were flourishing all across Europe, and some of these collections eventually became public. But why this infatuation with the marvellous? And why then? With the discovery of the New World came an overwhelming excitement for life and the living, the exotic and the alien, the cryptic and the mystical. Columbus’s 1492 voyage marked the beginning of an era of profound wonder, one in which the Western “classical model of mature, balanced detachment seemed at once inappropriate and impossible.” Wonder was, according to Stephen Greenblatt, “the central figure in the initial European response to the New World, the decisive emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of radical difference.”<sup>5</sup> As he goes on, European culture experienced something of “the ‘startle reflex’ one can observe in infants: eyes widened, arms outstretched, breathing stilled, the whole body momentarily convulsed.”<sup>6</sup> The New World opened a boundless array of possibilities, and the territory of the

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Crane, “Curious Cabinets and Imaginary Museums,” in *Museums and Memory* ed. Susan Crane (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 67.

<sup>4</sup> Weschler, *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder*, 61.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 14.

<sup>6</sup> Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 14.

readily conceivable was tremendously broadened by the palpability of the curious artefacts that flooded from it. Suddenly, humans' wildest fantasies could become facts. Narwhal horns were displayed as being those of unicorns. Monkey torsos sewed to fish tails were presented as authentic mermaids. Pelicans were taxidermized with their beak leaning down to their chest, for it was believed these birds would commonly rip their own heart out in order to resuscitate their dead offspring. Because after all, if things such as speckled horned horses with two metre-long necks – namely giraffes – existed, how was any of this less likely? But the West could not remain baffled indefinitely, and with the Enlightenment appeared the human longing for an ordering the world and for positivist certainty. Men took it upon themselves to classify nature as empirical knowledge took the upper hand. In these circumstances, curiosity no longer represented sufficient grounds for collecting, and the brightest minds of the period argued for wonder to be incompatible with reason. Descartes claimed that “what we commonly call being astonished is an excess of wonder which can never be otherwise than bad,” and the plenitude formerly epitomized by *wunderkammerns* came to be perceived as mere disorder.<sup>7</sup> Soon, art, science and technology evolved into separate pursuits, and cabinets of wonder gradually disappeared in favour of specialized museums and natural science collections. From this schism, modern museums were eventually born.

It is in this grand history of museological institutions, from their early ancestors to the temples of knowledge they came to be perceived as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that the Museum of Jurassic Technology locates itself. Upon entering the museum, the visitor is greeted by a presentation slideshow. A pedantic voice introduces it as a dignified heir to the museum tradition, in the continuity of such historical collections as Ole Worm's Museum Wormianum in Copenhagen, the Tradescant's Ark in South Lambeth or Charles Wilson Peales's pioneering Museum of natural sciences in Philadelphia. A mixture of early wondrous collections and rigorously classified museums, then. The voice introduces the MJT as an “educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic,” with collections supposedly arranged and displayed according to rigorous scientific methods.<sup>8</sup> It prides itself as being a “spot dedicated to the Muses, a place where men's mind could attain a

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<sup>7</sup> Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, 89.

<sup>8</sup> The Museum of Jurassic Technology, *Primi Decem Anni Jubilee Catalogue* (Los Angeles: Society for the Diffusion of Useful Information Press, Published by the Trustees), 13.

mood of aloofness, above everyday's affairs."<sup>9</sup> And the institution certainly holds its grand promises. Only not exactly in the way one would expect.

Upon entering the museum gallery, the visitor comes across a first surprise. Directly to their left, a diorama containing a mobile of Noah's Ark awaits them. The label describes it, in glowing terms, as the most complete collection of natural history that has ever existed. Except it did not. "So be it," the viewer might think, "it is only a metaphor." Pursuing the visit, they discover the existence of a rare bat species endemic to the "Tripiscum Plateau of the Circum-Caribbean region of Northern South America" in the *Deprong Mori* display (fig.1). Picking up a phone receiver First documented by anthropologist Bernard Maston during his 1872 fieldtrip with the Dozo people, this *Piercing Devil* was described as a "small demon which the local savages believe able to penetrate solid objects."<sup>10</sup> The report includes several occurrences of the bat flying through Dozo dwellings, but the most incredible anecdote is undoubtedly that of a Mori penetrating the left arm of a five year old infant, surprisingly leaving no lesion of any kind. The arm however became numb for three days, and according to the Dozo, the incident provided the child's hand with "the ability to heal warts, blood blisters and other superficial skin disorders."<sup>11</sup> Maston died a few years later, and with him the *Deprong Mori* fell into oblivion. It is only in the early 1950s, when acclaimed chiropterologist Donald R. Griffith of the Rockefeller University fortuitously stumbled upon his field's reports, that interest for the Mori resurged. Author of *Listening in the Dark: Echolocation in Bat and Men*, Griffith was a pioneer in bat studies, and the first scientist to suggest that these curious mammals found their bearings through echolocation. Fascinated by the Mori, Griffith left to the Tripiscum plateau to satisfy his scientific curiosity. Once on the field, he quickly found out that Piercing Devils were none other than *Myotis Lucifugus*, a species that had previously been documented yet only scarcely due to its rarity. All attempts to capture a specimen were unfortunately vain, as the Mori would simply fly straight through the nets. In order to remedy to this issue, Griffith mounted a second expedition, this time developing a trap the Mori would have no chance to escape. Helped by his team, he installed a pentagonal structure constituted of five 8 inches thick lead walls in the heart of the bat's territory, covering a total surface of forty thousand square

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<sup>9</sup>Hirshorn, Lecture: David Wilson on the Museum as Art," published November 4, 2008. <https://hirshhorn.si.edu/explore/lecture-david-wilson-on-the-museum-as-art/>.

<sup>10</sup> "Bernard Maston, Donald R. Griffith and the Deprong Mori of the Tripiscum Plateau," The Museum of Jurassic Technology, accessed March 15, 2021, [https://www.mjt.org/exhibits/foundation\\_collections/depmori/depmori.htm](https://www.mjt.org/exhibits/foundation_collections/depmori/depmori.htm)

<sup>11</sup> The Museum of Jurassic Technology, "Bernard Maston, Donald R. Griffith and the Deprong Mori of the Tripiscum Plateau."

foot. A seismograph was connected to the trap, and the team spent the next two months scrutinizing the sensors. The wait was long, but their efforts were eventually rewarded. On an early morning, the sensors had recorded a heavy shock. A Piercing Devil had flown into the wall, full-speed, and was now to remain stuck in lead, forever frozen in mid-flight (fig. 2). Or so the story tells us. The exhibit consists in a large glass case, its left-hand side displaying a small-scale model of a Dozo dwelling (fig. 3), a photographic portrait of Matson, a small diary that appears to contain his authentic field-notes, and a reconstitution of the anthropologist's desk, complete with scientific apparatus. The right-hand side is dedicated to Griffith's research and comprises various scientific drawings illustrating the functioning of echolocation and a model of the pentagonal trap, along with a portrait of the scientist and numerous photographs of the rainforest in which his research took place. In the centre, a large block of lead sits on a wooden pedestal, supposedly containing the very specimen Griffith captured. How fascinating to think that there is a bat in there.

Moving on to *The World is bound by secret knots*, the viewer discovers – or, in some cases, rediscovers – the incredible feats of 17<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher. The exhibition opens with an interminable, overly-detailed biography of the inventor. Kircher is described, in all simplicity, as an “inventor, composer, geographer, geologist, Egyptologist, historian, adventurer, philosopher, proprietor of one of the first public museums, physicist, mathematician, naturalist, astronomer, archaeologist, author of more than 40 published works.”<sup>12</sup> This impressive inventory would be enough to blow the viewer's mind, but it does not stop there. The text goes on to explain his miraculous healing from gangrene after an apparition of the Virgin Mary and his innumerable epic brushes with death, amongst many other things.<sup>13</sup> When entering the room, the viewer comes upon a series of ten exquisitely designed dioramas, each one illustrating or recreating discoveries and inventions of Kircher's, each one more bizarre than the last (fig. 4, fig. 5). *The Pyramids of Memphis and a Tomb* exhibit describes in eulogistic terms the Jesuit's deciphering of hieroglyphics found in Memphis. And probably way too laudatory since the text concludes that he actually quite miserably failed and that it is, as some may recall, Jean-François Champollion who in fact managed to unlock their secrets over a century later. Wilson seems to have specifically picked Kircher's oddest, most unbelievable inventions to display in his museum. What prevails, it appears, is not the Jesuit's

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<sup>12</sup> “The Life of Athanasius Kircher,” The Museum of Jurassic Technology, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://www.mjt.org/exhibits/kircher.html>.

<sup>13</sup> The Museum of Jurassic Technology, “The Life of Athanasius Kircher.”



achievements, but the utter strangeness of the objects, and Wilson's mastery in conceiving dioramas only adds to this.

The *Delani/Sonnabend Halls* relate the stories of Madelena Delani and Geoffrey Sonnabend. As her biography informs us, Delani was a gifted vocalist with no short-term memory, a condition that however never interfered with her career. The exhibit is complete with memorabilia of the singer, a dress she wore to her shows, her pearl necklace, her hand-fan, sheet music... (fig. 6) Most strikingly, perhaps, it includes numerous photographs of her, at various stages of her life. Geoffrey Sonnabend, for his part, was a neurophysiologist and memory researcher, author of the "milestone" three volumes collection *Obliscence: Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter*. In this elaborate and vastly unintelligible thesis, the scientist simply argues for the non-existence of memory. According to him, it is none other than the most elaborate of human constructions, serving to "buffer ourselves against the intolerable knowledge of the irreversible passage of time."<sup>14</sup> A multitude of scientific – and rather incomprehensible – sketches illustrating his theory are included in the exhibit (fig. 7).

On a warm night of 1936, the label tells us, Delani gave a Lieder recital in Iguazù Falls, Argentina, which Sonnabend happened to attend. The two individuals crossed paths then, without for all that exchanging a single word. The vocalist met an untimely demise in a tragic car accident the very next morning, just as Sonnabend was first articulating the basis for his groundbreaking theory. The exhibition does not make much sense in itself, for the two individuals whose life-stories it relates are solely linked by a near encounter and a close relationship to faulty memory.<sup>15</sup> There is a strong irony in dedicating a museum exhibit treating of the inaccuracy of memory, for it goes against what appears to be the very role of these institutions as preservers of memory. But the descriptions of the Falls, the beautiful diorama representing them, their biographies, the references to Chicago millionaire Charles F. Gunther's curious collections ... all of this surely invites the viewer's mind to wander.

One of the most intriguing exhibitions of the MJT doubtlessly is the *Fruit-stone carving* (fig. 8). In a small, carefully lit glass box is exhibited what indeed appears to be a fruit-stone, meticulously attached to a metal shaft. Fixed on the wall behind it, a small mirror gives the viewer a glimpse of the back of the object. The description reads the following:

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<sup>14</sup> Crane, "Curious Cabinets and Imaginary Museums," 85.

<sup>15</sup> "The Delani/Sonnabend Halls," The Museum of Jurassic Technology, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://www.mjt.org/exhibits/delson/delson.html>.

“Almond stone (?): the front is carved with a Flemish landscape in which is seated a bearded man wearing a biretta, a long tunic of classical character, and thick-soled shoes; he is seated with a viol between his knees while he tunes one of the strings. In the distance are representations of animals, including a lion, a bear, an elephant ridden by a monkey, a boar, a dog, a donkey, a stag, a camel, a horse, a bull, a bird, a goat, a lynx, and a group of rabbits: the latter under a branch on which sit an owl, another bird and a squirrel. On the back is shown an unusually grim Crucifixion, with a soldier on horseback, Longinus piercing Christ’s side with a lance; the cross is surmounted by a titulus inscribed INRI. Imbricated ground.

Dimensions: Length 13mm

Width 11mm”<sup>16</sup>

As the enumeration goes on, the exhibit becomes more and more laughable. Strangely enough for a museum in which nearly every exhibit comprises an elaborate viewing device, there is no magnifying glass in this display. The viewer can only rely on the label. When looking closely, one can however distinguish that the object seems to have been somewhat gauged. Of course almond stones are never smooth, but after all, this is a museum. This must be real.

But is it, really? Wandering through the carefully curated galleries, dizzy from the strangeness of the exhibits, there comes a point where the viewer might realize something is off. How is it possible that they only now discover the existence of the Deprong Mori? If Sonnabend’s work truly was a “milestone” research, why has the viewer never heard of it before? It is precisely where lies the genius of David Wilson’s enterprise: if the actual facts presented are incongruous enough to engender doubt in the visitor’s mind, the made up elements are just convincing enough to appear authentic. To visit the Museum of Jurassic Technology is to walk the thin line that lies between fact and fiction. Once this line is crossed, one can choose to fight, to be critical. Or alternatively, viewers can choose to let themselves sink into the absurd delight of the experience. The veracity of the displays becomes merely anecdotal, and some might even stop caring about it at all. Once they surrender, visitors step into an oneiric realm in which all that is left is a feeling of pure awe, and a good giggle for those who appreciate absurd humour. As related by Wilson himself in *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder*, a Jamaican man once entered the Museum of Jurassic Technology, only to come out a moment later and address him these

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<sup>16</sup> “Fruit-stone Carving,” Museum of Jurassic Technology, accessed March 21, 2021  
[https://www.mjt.org/exhibits/foundation\\_collections/fruit\\_stone/fruitstn.html](https://www.mjt.org/exhibits/foundation_collections/fruit_stone/fruitstn.html).

words “I realize this is a museum, but to me it’s more like a church.”<sup>17</sup> To some, the experience is indeed akin to a religious one, comparable to the notion of the Sublime that was so dear to the Victorians. Yet, in this case, it is not the sheer immensity of nature nor its aestheticism that moves us, but the sudden perspective of its boundless prospects. In the context of the MJT, the Natural and the Man-made suddenly are not so clear cut anymore. Like in the old days of the wunderkammern, they melt into one another, both falling into the category of the marvellous. These stories related by the MJT are transcendental, and it is an encounter that surpasses our comprehension. But wonder is an ambiguous feeling. For Greenblatt, its expression stands for all things unexplainable, that can “scarcely be believed.”<sup>18</sup> While insisting on the undeniability of experience, it also highlights the issue of credibility. The experience comes under the scope of the mystical, of the spiritual, it is a “spark of excitement leaping across the gap between man and the world.”<sup>19</sup> And it is a feeling we cannot shed immediately. Wonder remains wrapped around us. For a moment, our inner child is awakened, and we find amazement in everything. In the words of Michel de Certeau, it enables us “to be other and to move toward the other.”<sup>20</sup> We contemplate the world anew, in naive, silent awe.

The MJT thus reintroduces the early modern sense of wonder that has been lost in most contemporary museums. More than simply in its content, it has more than once been defined as a modern cabinet of wonder in its form. Similarly to those, the point is not the authenticity of the displayed artefacts nor the veracity of the stories surrounding them, but the sheer wonder these two elements might awake in the viewer. As depicted on a large variety of engravings (fig. 9), traditional *wunderkammerns* were filled with objects that could be picked up for closer analysis, drawers that visitors were encouraged to open. This foraging certainly was part of the pleasure of these microcosms, for it added yet another layer of discovery to the experience. This kind of interactive display is replicated in the MJT, only in a modernised manner. In the Deprong Mori exhibition, we are invited to pick up a phone receiver through which an authoritative voice – the same as in the introductory slideshow – relates the complete story of the bat and Griffith’s quest to pierce its mysteries. In a small display dedicated to Proust and childhood memories, visitors may scent the aroma emanating from a plate of seemingly fresh madeleines – the famous Madeleines de Proust. At the entrance of the Athanasius Kircher Hall,

<sup>17</sup> Weschler, *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder*, 52.

<sup>18</sup> Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Howard L. Parsons, “A Philosophy of Wonder,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 30, no. 1 (September 1969): 85.

<sup>20</sup> Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 2.

one may sit in a small, rather intimate booth and put on 3D glasses to watch a slideshow relating the Jesuit's life-story. More generally, the museum's exhibits are filled with elaborate optical devices, alternatively magnifying ones and others playing with projectors and mirrors enabling viewers to visualise ghostly presences floating in the dioramas. Viewing devices such as these were quite popular in early museums. The Museum of Jurassic Technology furthermore matches *wunderkammerns* through its small rooms filled with "darkly grounded but highlighted display spaces" that grant a sense of focus and privacy. The richly velvet decorated staircase leading to the second floor evokes a fancy private interior, and even the Russian tearoom and its orientalist patio recall the exotic fantasies of a 17<sup>th</sup> century eccentric bourgeois. Just like early modern cabinets often contained private libraries complementing the collections and serving as "retreats into the world of knowledge," the MJT features the Napoleon Library.<sup>21</sup> As small as this room is, it offers a wide spectrum of books viewers may pick up and flick through, treating of topics as varied as museum practice and sciences. The location of the Museum of Jurassic Technology is also in opposition with traditional museum setting. Far from the grand temple-like architecture that have long characterised museums, or the monumental, hyper modernist designs of more recent edifices, the MJT is simply located in an obscure storefront on busy Venice boulevard.<sup>22</sup> Nothing in the area may suggest the presence of such a museum nor attract a particular public interested in art or the Jurassic. Likewise, the site does not refer in any way to an "'original' context for its objects, as a local historical museum would."<sup>23</sup> As Susan Crane points out, the MJT "does not match either the private collection kept at home or the institutional siting for a public collection." Even though their content mirrored a universal discourse of natural history and the marvellous, *wunderkammerns* were profoundly intimate and private spaces. This subjectivity is wildly reflected in the Museum of Jurassic Technology, for it represents a world largely born from Wilson's very own mind and interests. Cabinet admission was "regulated by the owner," and, for the first decades of existence of the museum it was David Wilson himself who would greet the visitors.<sup>24</sup> The MJT furthermore rejects all forms of advertisement commonly used by other institutions, and promotion of the Museum of Jurassic Technology simply does not exist. Like in the case of early modern cabinets of wonder, word of mouth thus becomes the key form of publicity.

<sup>21</sup> Crane, "Curious Cabinets and Imaginary Museums," 65.

<sup>22</sup> Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Crane, "Curious Cabinets and Imaginary Museums," 65.

<sup>24</sup> Crane, "Curious Cabinets and Imaginary Museums," 65.

By drawing inspiration from both early cabinets of wonder and modern museums, the MJT creates a fantastic celebration of the museological tradition. While posing as a contemporary educational institution, it borrows the attributes of *wunderkammerns* to create a novel and enthralling experience prone to generating wonder. The use of forms and language employed by both cabinets of curiosity and museums enables the MJT to catch the audience's attention in a delightful manner, encouraging them to engage deeply with its displays. Practically all of the museum's exhibits consist in historical narratives, accounts of "discovery, creation, origin or, most disconcerting to the unwarily casual, simply stories." Their strange narratives guide the viewer's vision, while the considerable amount of details they relate surround the artefacts with both "curious and absurd trappings of authority and authenticity" that foster credibility.<sup>25</sup> In the presence of such a radically unusual combination of the credible and the fantastic, viewers become wonderstruck. Just like the 17<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois after visiting a *wunderkammern*, one can only come out of the Museum of Jurassic Technology with a lighter vision of the world and heightened senses, suddenly aware of the sublime that resides even in the most mundane of its components.

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<sup>25</sup> Spencer Downing, "So Boring It Must Be True: Faux History and the Generation of Wonder at the Museum of Jurassic Technology," *SPECS Journal of art and culture* 2 (2009): 50.

## Chapter 2: Satire and the Museum as Art

Definitions of what museums are, or ought to be, are innumerable. A straightforward and conventional one would be this of Peter Vergo, according to whom museums exist in order to “acquire, safeguard, conserve and display objects, artefacts and works of art of various kinds.”<sup>26</sup> In a more elaborate manner, Carol Duncan argues that we widely tend to associate museums with a form of secular ritual. If she too interprets them as preservers of a community’s memory, she furthermore describes them as contributing to the establishment of a supposedly undeniable cultural identity, an ultimate truth which forms the basis of for their knowledge and validates its values and memories. This truth is also characterized by being rational and verifiable.<sup>27</sup> Germain Bazin, curator at the Louvre, for his part characterizes museums as “a temple where Time seems suspended.”<sup>28</sup> In his opinion, the visitor enters a museum in the hope of finding “momentary cultural epiphanies,” one of those that provide him with “the intuition of knowing intuitively his essence and his strengths.”<sup>29</sup> The epiphany certainly may happen when visiting the MJT, but it is of a very different kind than what one would normally expect. What happens when the most basic role of the museum, this of guardian of historical artefacts, is negated? When the objects are fake, their stories falsified? In the context of the Jurassic, the immutability of the museum’s enterprise simply becomes obsolete. This chapter will thus examine standard museum practices, and how the Museum of Jurassic Technology exploits them in order to satirize the “ideological force of a cultural experience that claims for its truths the status of objective knowledge.”<sup>30</sup>

Museums thus serve to construct and assert the ideological identity of a community through the use of so-called objective knowledge. In his book *History Museum as an Effective Educational Institution*, J. Patrick Wohler draws an extensive description of the display processes that shall be used to make museums successful educational spaces. According to him, the museum space should be divided in various “workable units,” or galleries. The entrance of the museum should ideally comprise an “orientation gallery,” a small space that grants viewers with pre-visit

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Vergo, “The Reticent Object,” in *The New Museology*, ed. Peter Vergo (London: Reaktion Books, 1989), 41.

<sup>27</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 8.

information and thus help them make the best of their visit. In the case of the MJT, this element could be seen as being embodied by the presentation slide. Each gallery should have a conceptual aim that relates to the whole. Since people visit museums for a variety of reasons, they can effectively “be drawn to and through an exhibit that is well conceived, attractively presented and meaningfully organized.”<sup>31</sup> The exhibits of the Museum of Jurassic Technology certainly are attractive. Reflections of Wilson’s savoir-faire in the field of special effects, they are artworks in themselves. The aestheticism of the exhibits is worth that of the dioramas found in the most illustrious museums of natural history, while the backlit images and the shadow-boxed objects employ state-of-the-art museum design. Regarding labels, they obviously are central to the display, but there is, Wohler tells us, “a very real danger” in their use.<sup>32</sup> According to him, artefacts and the way they are presented should be able to speak with minimal verbal approach, explanatory labels thus solely contributing additional information. As a general rule, labels should always be as straightforward as possible in order to not to be needlessly tiresome. Otherwise, the risk is that there might be too much information to take in. This could result in the viewer losing interest and thus undermine the museum’s aim of conveying powerful cultural ideas. In order to avoid this, some museums even limit them to a certain amount of words. David Wilson willingly ignores this standard, replacing succinct explanations with endless, convoluted scholarly written texts, perfectly satirizing the tedious and pedantic aspects of “authenticating scholarship.”<sup>33</sup> As negative as it may sound, Spencer Downing’s essay title “So Boring It Must Be True” makes a point. However wondrous the narratives of the MJT might be, there is a point where the viewer simply cannot take it anymore. But that is only part of the satire, for whoever managed to go through an entire museum without getting sick of it? There is a point where one simply cannot take it anymore. The copious use of academic references, footnotes and elaborate citations in the labels only add credit to the MJT’s tales.

In this same essay, Downing details the simple recipe used by the Museum of Jurassic Technology to construct its effective semblance of authenticity. By rooting fake elements in legitimate historical and scientific basis, using precise dates and numbers, genuine locations, names or ones that sound real enough, Wilson creates fertile-ground for the illusion to grow. This achievement becomes obvious when delving into the museum’s exhibitions. Take the

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<sup>31</sup> Patrick J. Wohler, *History Museum as an Effective Educational Institution* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1976), 22.

<sup>32</sup> Wohler, *History Museum as an Effective Educational Institution*, 27.

<sup>33</sup> Weschler, *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder*, 39.

extraordinary story of the *Deprong Mori*, for instance. The scientific evidence and processes related in the exhibit seem absolutely genuine, and most visitors would not be familiar enough with the scientific field to question them. Everyone – or practically everyone – knows that bats get their bearings through the use of echolocation. No one would doubt the existence of Bernard Maston, nor the authenticity of his expedition to the Tripiscum Plateau, for nothing sounds more familiar than the field-works of an obscure 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropologist relating arcane fables.<sup>34</sup> Some might remember the name *Dozo*, for they do exist. Now, here is the reality. There exists no account whatsoever of an anthropologist named Bernard Maston. The *Dozo* are not a tribe originating from South America but a brotherhood of traditional hunters found in Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>35</sup> For what it's worth, the Tripiscum Plateau does not exist either, although a type of plants found in Central America bears the close enough name of Tripsacum. At this point, it would already seem enough to judge the whole display as being fake. But the most incredible aspect of this story is related by Lawrence Weschler. While working at the UCLA library and still engrossed with his marvelous experience at the MJT, something pushed him to research, almost subconsciously, some of the sources presented in the museum. Upon typing "Bernard Maston" in the library's computerized database, the screen showed "No Records Found." The same result came up upon searching "Donald R. Griffith." When trying his luck with the title *Listening in the Dark*, however, Weschler came across the work of Donald R. Griffin. Ending with an *n*, not a *th*. Finding no reference to Maston nor the Deprong Mori in the book, he eventually contacted Griffin himself. The scientist had never heard of the Museum of Jurassic Technology before, and apparently had a good laugh when hearing the story of the *Piercing Devil*. According to him, the *Myotis Lucifugus* simply is the most commonly found bat species in Northern America. And of course it does not have the ability to fly through solid objects. Griffin's conclusion to the conversation is compelling. "Still, you know, it's funny," he says. "Fifty years ago, when we were first proposing the existence of something like sonar in bats, most people thought that idea no less preposterous."<sup>36</sup> In light of this comment, the MJT suddenly appears as a critique of the immutable certainty we tend to associate with scientific facts, and hints once again at the idea that it is not because the narratives presented in this museum are not real that they could not be.

<sup>34</sup> "Bernard Maston, Donald R. Griffith and the Deprong Mori of the Tripiscum Plateau," Museum of Jurassic Technology, accessed April 16, 2021, [https://www.mjt.org/exhibits/foundation\\_collections/depkori/depkori.htm](https://www.mjt.org/exhibits/foundation_collections/depkori/depkori.htm).

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Hellweg, "Hunters, Ritual and Freedom: Dozo Sacrifice as a Technology of the Self in the Benkadi Movement of Côte d'Ivoire," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 1 (March 2009): 37.

<sup>36</sup> Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, 37-38.



Athanasius Kircher's feats are, for their part, authentic. He did accomplish and practice all of the activities enumerated in his lengthy biography. Perhaps some of the details are fictitious, but who could tell at this point? In any case, to dedicate an exhibition to the Jesuit surely constitutes an homage. Not only to the museum tradition, for he was the founder of the Museum Kircherianum, one of the first public museums, but for he furthermore seemed to acknowledge no limitations to the realm of the conceivable. He dedicated his life its expansion, however absurd his ideas may have seemed at times. But there is another layer to this exhibit. In the end, we might wonder who is the foolish one: the mad genius who never ceased experimenting or the viewer who considers museum exhibits as representations of immutable truth, without ever questioning them.

Concerning the *Delani/Sonnabend Halls*, neither of them existed at all. And yet the incredible attention to details that has been brought to the display convinces us that they did. The artefacts presented cleverly demonstrate that our comprehension of the past and history relies on tangible objects. The photographic portraits displayed in many of the exhibition only heighten the feeling of authenticity, for we still hold photographs as objective proofs. This is particularly powerful in the Madelena Delani display, for it contains images of her at various ages, including one from her wedding day. This illustrates that, in an era where anyone can manipulate an image, we are still credulous enough to interpret them as proof when presented in a legitimate enough context. The immateriality of death too occupies a substantial role in this exhibit, for all there is to evoke the once so-called physical existence of those two characters are futile objects they have left behind. Their presence in the displays largely participates in making their stories more credible, just as artefacts are used in museums all around the globe to make palpable the life of any historical figure. The display furthermore demonstrates our gullibility through the fact a bit of memorabilia, some photographs and a well-written story are enough to convince us of the existence of someone who has never been. As for Sonnabend, his theories of memory as pure illusion become illustrative of the futility of the museum enterprise, and more generally of history itself.

Regarding the fruit-stone carving exhibit, as surprising as it may sound, it is genuine. More or less. In *Tradescant's Rarities*, a volume dedicated to the Tradescant family and the collections they bequeathed to Elias Ashmole and that served as the basis of the Ashmolean Museum, Lawrence Weschler made a compelling discovery. Amongst the myriad of marvellous curiosities inventoried are fruit-stone carvings. The accompanying description is in all points similar to the one found in the MJT. These carvings however fit two separate fruit-stones, each about 10mm larger than the one presented in the Jurassic – a significant difference, at this

scale.<sup>37</sup> Looking at the illustrating plate, one can indeed make out all the elements the description promises (fig. 10). The man with his viol, the animals, the gruesome Crucifixion are all there and visible to the naked eye. And it looks nothing like the carving exhibited in the MJT. But if this artefact belongs to the Ashmolean Museum's collection, then what exactly is exhibited in the Jurassic? For all we know, David Wilson managed to get thousands of visitors to squint at a regular fruit-stone for interminable minutes, trying to discern the aforementioned carvings when there is actually nothing spectacular to see. The absence of a magnifying glass only strengthen this theory, and the absurdity of the situation becomes a coup de maître in itself. A point that is worth being raised is that, in a lecture given at the Smithsonian museum, Wilson explains the origin of the artefact, and he himself deplores that it is "not as good" as the fruit-stone carving displayed in the Ashmolean Museum. Of course he blatantly omits that the description was purely and simply taken from the Ashmolean catalogue.<sup>38</sup>

But the hoax goes way beyond the displayed artefacts and the often imaginary narratives that surround them, as epitomized by the publications made by the Museum. Fine instances of academic pastiche, they have all been emitted by the Society For the Diffusion of Useful Information Press, a Californian publishing house. If the name might ring a bell, it is probably because the publisher appears to be internationally established, since apparently implanted in a myriad of cities across the world. The truth is that the address of the Society – 9091 Divide Place, West Covina, California – leads to nowhere. As for the postcode affiliated with, it is certainly not an American one, but OX2 6DP – that of the Oxford University Press. Regarding the name, it is actually a parody of The Society For the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. Originally founded in London in 1826 with the aim of providing approachable knowledge to people with little access to education, the society then spread around the globe over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, eventually becoming present in various cities across the United States. These are relatively minor details, but they demonstrate the infinite meticulousness with which the Museum of Jurassic Technology was created. The joke is endless, its extent immeasurable. At this point, it begins to appear that behind the MJT lies a machination much bigger than anyone could imagine. There is always more to be found for who is patient and curious enough to look.

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<sup>37</sup> Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, 97.

<sup>38</sup> Hirshorn, "Lecture: David Wilson on the Museum as Art," published November 4, 2008 <https://hirshhorn.si.edu/explore/lecture-david-wilson-on-the-museum-as-art/>.

There exists the deeply-rooted idea that to contemplate an artefact, to take in its story, somehow elevates the viewer's mind. That it might, in one way or another, expand their knowledge. This principle is vigorously anchored in Western Culture, to the point that, as asserted by Ludmilla Jordanova, the "overall experience associated with museums is edification."<sup>39</sup> This idea that the contemplation of an artefact should participate in the heightening of the viewer's spirit dates back to early cabinets of wonder. But perhaps it is more about the story surrounding it than about the object itself. Every real story, Walter Benjamin argues, "contains, openly or covertly, something useful," even though the utility might not always be obvious.<sup>40</sup> When addressing the idea of story-telling – or, rather, history telling – Stephen Greenblatt suggests that anecdotes are representative of larger histories and stories. Since no narrative can ever conceivably be told in its entirety, anecdotes serve as stepping stones into the larger reality of historical narratives. Artefacts displayed in museums serve an identical purpose. They are material anecdotal means of representing the plenitude of history, vessels of meaning. Our interpretation of them is necessarily biased by their very presence in the museum environment. If museums are sanctuaries aiming at the conservation of certain objects, then it implies that these objects have a particularity that, in one way or another, makes them materially, historically or intellectually valuable enough to be conserved. From there, the question arises: what does it take to make an object historical?<sup>41</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, in *Learning to Curse*, shares this dictionary definition of historicism: "The belief that processes are at work in history that man can do little to alter."<sup>42</sup> This formulation of history as an abstraction escaping all human agency tends to be one that rests comfortably installed in our minds, undisturbed. Except that History *is* a human construction, the product of centuries of both willing and unwilling selection as to what deserves to be remembered and what does not. As Greenblatt argues, these concrete choices lie in "particular, contingent cases, the selves fashioned and acting according to the generative rules and conflicts of a given culture."<sup>43</sup> History is bound to be flawed, for it is a human science. And humans are flawed. This biased pattern is reproduced in the context of museums, only perhaps in an even stronger manner since the very notion of display adds yet another layer of subjectivity to the history it presents. As Ludmilla Jordanova argues, "all museums are exercises in classification."<sup>44</sup> And it is on the histories it creates that rests the genius of the MJT.

<sup>39</sup> Ludmilla Jordanova, "Objects of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Museums," in *The New Museology* ed. Peter Vergo, 23.

<sup>40</sup> Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Crane, "Curious Cabinets and Imaginary Museums," 67.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 445.

<sup>43</sup> Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse*, 446.

<sup>44</sup> Jordanova, "Objects of Knowledge," 23.

By conceiving narratives for implausible, impossible facts, the museum criticizes the seldom analyzed assumption that history induces legitimacy.<sup>45</sup> It adopts the forms of a museum as a way of instilling wonder not only through the artefacts – authentic or fictional – it displays, but through the very nature of museums. In portraying history entirely fictionally, the museum goes a step further from merely approaching history as a retrospective construction. It thereby becomes disconcerting to even the adherents of constructivism, those willing to interpret history “as a production, as a perpetually changing and interested construction of what the past means to the present.” When a curiosity is alleged to represent history, a distressing “blending of categories” occurs.<sup>46</sup> And in claiming to revive the stories of people who have supposedly been forgotten but that, in his opinion, deserve to be remembered, Wilson claims an attempt to remedy to the issue of this historical selection, at his modest scale. Except he created most of these characters. By borrowing museum language in a way that subverts its , the MJT instills viewers with doubt that goes on to plague all of his encounters with the “Culturally Sacrosanct.”<sup>47</sup> Because it is called a “museum,” we spontaneously expect a degree of veracity in it displays. And yet the signs are there from the very beginning, the name of the museum itself gives away the hoax. Wilson pushes the vice as far as presenting an apparently broken scientific device tagged “display out of order,” a rather common sight in museums. Except the label has been there ever since the Museum’s opening in 1992. In the same vein, a wall at the entrance of the museum bears the inscription “Asia (Including the Pacific Islands),” as to indicate the geographic provenance of the exhibited artefacts. A quick glance around suffices to realize that strictly none of the objects displayed in this room came from this continent. None in the entire museum, actually. The MJT thus counts on visitors holding the implicit expectation that in a museum “one looks at artifacts and reads information because one *should* look at and read about them.”<sup>48</sup> This, arguably, reflects the function of all museums. But in the context of the MJT, history itself is produced as a curiosity. This museum recreates the Western objectification of knowledge produced through museum collecting, but also specifically critics contemporary curatorial verities. Ironically enough, the more extensive the viewer’s general knowledge, the more susceptible he is to fall into the trap. When visiting the museum, I knew that humans could grow fleshy protuberances vaguely resembling a horn. The story of Mary Davis of Saughall’s horn did not surprise me much. I had read about the cordyceps mushrooms

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<sup>45</sup> Downing, “So Boring It Must Be True,” 50.

<sup>46</sup> Crane, “Curious Cabinets and Imaginary Museums,” 66.

<sup>47</sup> Weschler, *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder*, 39.

<sup>48</sup> Downing, “So Boring it Must Be True,” 48.

mentioned in Weschler's book and how they "brainwashed" ants to then grow out of their head. I had vaguely heard of some 17<sup>th</sup> century mad genius named Athanasius Kircher. Because of this, I believed all the more that everything I was seeing was real. And yet, it is while reading Kircher's ridiculously detailed biography that doubt first started weaving its way into my mind. Suddenly, I became unsure of my own knowledge. Because that is what the Museum of Jurassic Technology does, it infects the viewer with uncertainty. It infects us to the point where we come to doubt of our own sight. In his book, Weschler questions of the very existence of Hagop Sandaldjian, the artist whose micro-sculptures are displayed in the *Eye of the Needle* exhibition (fig. 11).<sup>49</sup> He does exist, and the proof is right there in front of us. We see the miniature sculptures with our own eyes. And if they exist, someone has to have created them. But after having stared at so many dioramas and peeked through just as many optical devices producing ghostly holograms, it becomes only fair to doubt what we are seeing. Wilson plays on this with brio and, in the end, he makes his point. Knowledge, reality and objective truths are only relative.

The Museum of Jurassic Technology therefore achieves institutional critique in its own quirky way. By employing strategies and forms used by "standard" museums, it relies on generic expectations and presents "fantastic, even untenable stories" in a manner that undermines their sensationalism.<sup>50</sup> The material itself subverts the questions museums are meant to provoke. In the MJT, interrogations on the relationship between "knowledge, objects, and curatorial power" become elusive. Educational without being truthful, the MJT induces a deeper epistemological conundrum: "How do we know what we know?" and its companion riddle, "So what? What kind of knowledge actually matters?"<sup>51</sup> When addressing the topic of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, it is tempting to focus fully on its satirical aspect. Surely it reminds us of our lack of critical eye regarding museological institutions, and emphasizes that these are none other than manufactured artifice. It undermines the undeniability of history as empirical truth. By planting this seed in our mind, the Museum of Jurassic Technology pushes its viewers to interrogate the legitimacy of museums in general. But all of this only hits later, when reflecting back on the experience. Wandering through the galleries, it is not the mockery that occupies our mind, but the delightful, incredibly well-rounded absurdity of it all, a persistent, devout homage to "the world and to what we make of it, a tribute to Kircher's 'all-consuming

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<sup>49</sup> Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, 58.

<sup>50</sup> Downing, "So Boring it Must Be True," 51.

<sup>51</sup> Downing, "So Boring It Must Be True," 50.

desire’.”<sup>52</sup> As Rothstein articulated, “there are times when you walk through these spaces smiling at human folly.”<sup>53</sup> Because, let’s admit it: the joke is hilarious.

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<sup>52</sup> Rothstein, “Where Outlandish Meets Landish.”

<sup>53</sup> Rothstein, “Where Outlandish Meets Landish.”

### Chapter 3: Who's laughing?

Despite being considered a masterpiece by many, the Museum of Jurassic Technology fails at winning unanimous support. Indeed by pushing museum principles to their extreme limit, it becomes much of a “love it or hate it” kind of experience. The topic of the MJT's audience seems to have scarcely been treated, which seems rather paradoxical given that its performance becomes only effective in the presence of a public who experiences it. When browsing the Tripadvisor reviews of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, one observes an interesting dichotomy between visitors coming out of the MJT in awe and those who feel like they have been scammed because it does not fill the standard museum role. The topic of wonderstruck visitors having been approached in the first chapter, this chapter will focus mainly on the type of audience the MJT is addressed to, on visitors' negative experiences, and seek to understand the acrimony of their reactions. In order to do so, general expectations of museum audiences will be examined, before moving on more specifically to the MJT's visitors. To do so, both testimonies related by scholars and journalists will be used. Reviews of the Jurassic will also be employed in order to get a glimpse of the general public's impressions.

To understand the particular case of the viewers of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, one should first take a look at the general expectations and composition of museums audiences. In his essay *Museum Visiting as a Cultural Phenomenon*, Nick Merriman calls attention to the fact that, despite the numerous critical debates surrounding museum display, little concern has been shown regarding the experience of the viewer. Museum professionals do not fully comprehend how visitors assimilate the messages, intended or unintended, that these institutions convey. Museums and exhibitions are therefore seldom planned with a clear understanding of the expectations and composition of their audience.<sup>54</sup> In an attempt to remedy to this issue, he closely analyzed museum visitors through a series of polls and, if the study has been conducted in the United Kingdom, it is safe to assume that odds may change but the motives and expectations of the viewers are fundamentally the same as in the United States. According to Merriman, then, the majority of visitors seem to go to museums out of specific interest in the subject displayed in its exhibitions. This could potentially pose an issue in the case of The Museum of Jurassic Technology, for one does not know what to expect from it. A viewer

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<sup>54</sup> Nick Merriman, “Museum Visiting as a Cultural Phenomenon,” in *The New Museology*, ed. Peter Vergo (London: Reaktion Books, 1989), 149.

interested in the Jurassic and visiting the museum hoping to come across specimens from this era will necessarily be disappointed. Likewise for a visitor interested in technology, even though the ingenuity presented in the displays could ravish many. On the other hand, with a name as antithetical as this one, the viewer could only expect the non-sense of this institution. Furthermore, museumgoers are generally “of high status” and tend to “have received tertiary education.”<sup>55</sup> A certain cultured elite is then more bound to attend museums, and to appreciate their displays. In *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, Weschler incidentally illustrates this fact. In an attempt to collect information about the MJT, the author discussed with various admirers of the institution: John Walsh and Marcia Tucker, respectively Director of the Getty Museum and Director of New York's New Museum, and Ralph Rugoff and Maria Porges, both art critics. Needless to say, they all have a certain academic background. From there, one could consider the Museum of Jurassic Technology as a niche institution, mainly comprehensible to connoisseurs. However, Merriman's study points towards a widening of museum audiences.<sup>56</sup> One could surely consider that this democratisation of museum attendance has had time to take place since his study was conducted in 1985. This might partially explain the incomprehension of some of the viewers of the MJT, for the museum heavily relies on academic and intellectual references in order to achieve its effect. The academic pastiche presented in the endless explanatory labels, for instance, is bound to be more appreciated by viewers with a certain academic background, or who are at least familiar with this literary “genre” and its twists. And indeed, one is always more akin to appreciate a joke when they are able to comprehend its extent. The heavy use of authenticating scholarship might thus put a curb to some viewers' appreciation, as exemplified by this brilliant review: “I couldn't shake the feeling that I was an unwilling participant in a long, drawn-out, intellectual, inside joke.”<sup>57</sup> Surprisingly, some visitors do not even comprehend that the MJT's stories are fictional. This minority obviously includes a portion of viewers who, out of boredom or inattention, do not read the labels in full, as may happen in any museum. But some viewers do follow the narratives and still miss the slippages. In doing so, they incidentally highlight the dramatic lack of critical eye we tend to have in regard to museological institutions (“Don't go if you are not fond of ancient history, especially European history”<sup>58</sup>). There is something almost tragic in the fact

<sup>55</sup> Merriman, “Museum Visiting as Cultural Phenomenon,” 152.

<sup>56</sup> Merriman, “Museum Visiting as Cultural Phenomenon,” 170-71.

<sup>57</sup> “The Museum of Jurassic Technology,” Tripadvisor, accessed February 6, 2021, [https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction\\_Review-g32272-d105176-Reviews-Museum\\_of\\_Jurassic\\_Technology-Culver\\_City\\_California.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g32272-d105176-Reviews-Museum_of_Jurassic_Technology-Culver_City_California.html).

<sup>58</sup> Tripadvisor, “The Museum of Jurassic Technology.”



that one would be so candid as to believe everything displayed in the Museum of Jurassic Technology is real. Yet the truth is, they cannot be blamed. It seems to be that it is not so much about the sheer naïveté of these viewers, but rather about the problematic relationship we, in the Western world, entertain with museums and their reputation as immutable authoritative institutions. If museums have come to be increasingly seen as sites of leisure in recent years, the idea that they ought to be vessels of empirical knowledge, that a museum visit is synonymous with intellectual enlightenment, is still very much tied up in our culture. Nothing strange, then, about the fact that upon entering a space named *Museum*, paying an admittance fee, and being immersed in an environment fully mimicking this of an “actual” museum, one would feel safe from not questioning its veracity. We all are just as credulous as any upon starting our visit. If something is worth being exhibited, then there must be a reason. The artefact must have historical significance, be valuable, or be a conveyor of knowledge. But we forget that the criterions for this selection have been made by humans just like us, incapable of pure objectivity. Susan Crane was tricked too, and there is something perversely reassuring about the fact that a highly experienced museologist such as her would be fooled upon her first visit. “I was embarrassed. I had been duped,” she wrote, once realising Sonnabend and his theories were pure invention.<sup>59</sup>

One should however keep in mind that all museum visitors are not necessarily seeking to educate themselves. A great number of them come to simply hang out, or to entertain themselves or their guests.<sup>60</sup> If the overall negative reactions express confusion and were written by people who simply did not know what to do of their eerie experience, some critiques are way more acerbic. Alternatively describing the MJT as a “museum of random crap,” a “great place for a murder scene,” and even the result of the rummaging of a “bunch of loopy potheads (...) through a bunch of attic,” they generally accuse the museum of being a scam.<sup>61</sup> Of course it is only comprehensible that people should feel that way. After all, they paid to visit a *museum*, and the MJT does not exactly fit the standards they expected. However, when they emit such comments as “there are so many great things to do in LA city, (...) don’t waste your precious time there” or “there are so many other better unique LA museums worth paying for,” it becomes obvious they have missed the point of the MJT, both in its critical and entertaining aspects.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Crane, “Curious Cabinets and Imaginary Museums,” 64.

<sup>60</sup> Wolher, *History Museum as an effective educational institution* 22.

<sup>61</sup> Tripadvisor, “The Museum of Jurassic Technology.”

<sup>62</sup> Tripadvisor, “The Museum of Jurassic Technology.”

But why could it be that the Museum of Jurassic Technology elicits such passionate reactions? Perhaps it is due to the MJT repeatedly presenting itself as an educational institution. In calling itself a museum while simultaneously presenting a counterfeit history, viewers might interpret the MJT as failing to meet the criterions of the museum. As Carol Duncan explains, “to control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths.”<sup>63</sup> With the MJT, the sanctity of these trustworthy institutions they are so familiar with is being violated, and the manipulation that lies behind every museum is suddenly revealed. Of course the institutional critique is pushed to its extreme, but it is this very exaggeration that ought to act as an eye-opener. Another issue might be that the MJT is in fact closer to a modern era cabinet of curiosity rather than to a museum, and as Susan Crane points out, “to visit a curiosity cabinet, one must be prepared to be confounded.”<sup>64</sup> Once again, it does not fit the expectancies of regular museum visitors. Of course, whether it is a museum or a *wunderkammern*, visitors are meant to come away with a feeling of spiritual nourishment, a sense of enlightenment. But this effect however vanishes for viewers who feel that they have been deceived. In any case, all these instances epitomize a deeply anchored aspect of human nature: dependent on cultural identity as we are, we do not like having what we hold for truth being shaken. The virulence of these reactions is fascinating, for they reveal how deep our dependence to authoritative institutions is.

And yet, like Susan Crane, we could all smile at our own complicity in “the museum’s veracity-confirming/conforming function,” the “representation of the physical world in museums.”<sup>65</sup> And for most visitors, it is precisely what happens. In fact, the more they become conscious of the manipulation, the more they smile at it. As nonsensical as it may sound, David Wilson’s work is fake in the most earnest of manners. In a city like Los Angeles, where much is about sensationalism, the MJT strangely constitutes a refreshing oasis of genuineness. The MJT is not about profit, but an act of hubris from a man who invested everything he had, both financially and emotionally, into creating a space in which the human mind could escape the relentless materialism and painful realism of contemporary life. There is a form of sweet madness in this enterprise, and perhaps a comparison to be made with Athanasius Kircher insatiable curiosity to explore the limits of the universe. Or, in this case, of Western culture.

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<sup>63</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 8.

<sup>64</sup> Crane, “Curious Cabinets and Imaginary Museums,” 65.

<sup>65</sup> Crane, “Curious Cabinets and Imaginary Museums,” 64.

The Museum of Jurassic Technology is thus the ultimate institutional critique, and one could deplore the fact it has been so widely overlooked by scholarship and the general press alike. The issue, however, is the following: it appears that, in several cases, visitors have entered the MJT after having read about it, and thus visited it with in mind the explicit expectation of being seized with wonder and overwhelmed with a deep revelation regarding the constructivist role of museums. But one cannot plan enlightenment, the expectancy simply sabotages the effect. Drawing from personal experience, I know that the impact would not have been the same if I had known in advance what this was all about. The experience would surely have been tremendously enjoyable, but probably incomparable to the astonishment I felt. The aura of mystery cultivated around the Museum is thus essential to its operation, and David Wilson knows this very well. That is why the trick is never revealed, why taking photographs is forbidden, why he simply smiled when Susan Crane confronted him with the proof of Geoffrey Sonnabend's non-existence, and why, over the course of months, if not years, he barely ever broke irony in front of Lawrence Weschler. And why there seems to be an implicit rule amongst admirers of the MJT that one should never reveal too much to someone who is yet to be initiated. Throughout the years, the museum has gained a solid reputation, to the point that it has become a sort of community. As Weschler wrote, "it's no longer so much about what's going on 'inside' David as much as about what's going on 'between' him and the world."<sup>66</sup> It took years for the public to start appreciating the museum enough to make it viable. Eventually a few of these visitors, in their infatuation for the place, remained "stuck" there and became staff members. From this small community evolved a fruitful collaboration of ideas, eventually resulting in the marvelous microcosm the MJT has become today.<sup>67</sup> Wilson's aim when creating the Museum was to provide "an environment in which people can change, and he has seen it happen."<sup>68</sup> As he acknowledges, the Museum of Jurassic Technology creates a radically different experience for every visitor. He therefore shies away from expressing what he precisely expects his audience to take away from the experience, but considers his mission accomplished as long as "there is some sense of being inspired."<sup>69</sup> Visitors to the MJT continually find themselves shimmering between wondering at the marvels of nature and pondering whether any of this could possibly be true. And, as Weschler tells us, it's "that very shimmer, the capacity for such

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<sup>66</sup> Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonders*, 53.

<sup>67</sup> Exploratorium, "Museum of Jurassic Technology Part 2 - Driven: True Stories of Inspiration," "Museum of Jurassic Technology Part 2 - Driven: True Stories of Inspiration," published January 13, 2014, video, 4:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=recdbJpkxt4&t=9s>.

<sup>68</sup> Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonders*, 44.

<sup>69</sup> Exploratorium, "Museum of Jurassic Technology Part 2."

delicious confusion,” which Wilson sometimes seem to intend, that perhaps “constitute the most blessedly wonderful thing about being human.”<sup>70</sup>

So, could the Museum of Jurassic Technology have done better to appeal a more general public? The short answer would be that one can never please everyone, anyway. But more than that, if the heavy academic parody has proven to be problematic to some visitors, it is essential to the functioning of the MJT. In any case, the overwhelming majority of visitors do come out of its galleries in awe. In the end, whether these people drew from the experience a heightened sense of criticism regarding museum institutions is anecdotal, for, as David Wilson himself explains, “part of the assigned task is to reintegrate people to wonder.”<sup>71</sup> As Howard Parsons has pointed out, the feeling of wonder has passed from God, to nature, to man throughout the centuries, until the emotion became attenuated in our modern era.<sup>72</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his 1955 book *Tristes Tropiques*, had already rued the loss of exoticism and wonder provoked by globalization and the development of the media, a state of affairs that has only tragically increased since then. In this context, the MJT provides us with a space in which the marvellous is reborn. If the effect is not unanimous, Wilson has nonetheless accomplished his mission. The Museum of Jurassic Technology simply is a precious gift in a world where people become increasingly jaded.

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<sup>70</sup> Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonders*, 60.

<sup>71</sup> Weschler, “Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder,” 60.

<sup>72</sup> Parsons, “A Philosophy of Wonder,” 85.

## Conclusion:

David Wilson has turned the very notion of museums into a curiosity. In order to preserve History as a safe and reliable concept, the MJT has to be consigned to the realm of art, thus becoming an installation, a performance. In this context, exhibits come to be seen as curiosities too, combinations of “the real and the artifactual, historical information and the ahistorical permanence of timelessly valued artifacts.”<sup>73</sup> The MJT appropriated the institutional language of museums in order to criticize them, turning it into a parody. It deconstructs the traditional museum narrative and alienates the familiar. In blurring the boundary between factual and irrational without ever admitting it, the MJT forces us to face our own lack of critical sense when confronted with institutional authority and pushes us to take on a new look on what we hold for truth. With its elusiveness of meaning, the MJT illustrates the futility of the museum enterprise. If Marcia Tucker resumes it as “a museum, a critique of museums, and a celebration of museums – all rolled into one,”<sup>74</sup> one might in the end wonder whether it is a museum or the representation of one. In any case, the Museum of Jurassic Technology creates an imaginary that is beyond the made up. It ignites the spark of excitement that is wonder in a simultaneously old-fashioned and ground-breaking manner.<sup>75</sup> As quoted by David Wilson, “all of nature in its awful vastness and incomprehensible complexity is in the end interrelated - worlds within worlds within worlds: the seen and the unseen - the physical and the immaterial are all connected - each exerting influence on the next - bound, as it were, by chains of analogy - magnetic chains. Every decision, every action mirrors, ripples, reflects and echoes throughout the whole of creation. The world is indeed bound with secret knots.”<sup>76</sup> This quote, attributed to a certain Valentine Worth, struck me as the perfect summary to the Museum of Jurassic Technology’s enterprise, both in its wondrous content and its awfully convoluted form. As ludicrous as The Jurassic’s stories are, they indeed are bound with the real world. And they offer glimpses into oddly conceivable alternate realities, ones in which bats fly through huts, where Noah’s Ark has once braved the divine deluge. If museums are spaces where knowledge and truth reign as masters, the MJT is one where the imaginary can expand to its wildest confines. An utopia in which the fantastic becomes just as real as the factual, inviting us to see

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<sup>73</sup> Crane, “Curious Cabinets and Imaginary Museums,” 64.

<sup>74</sup> Weschler, *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder*, 40.

<sup>75</sup> Parsons, “A Philosophy of Wonder,” 85.

<sup>76</sup> Exploratorium, “Museum of Jurassic Technology Part 1 - Driven: True Stories of Inspiration,” published August 22, 2011, video, 3:49, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DC1nSF9v3RA>.

the world anew. Upon researching Valentine Worth in the library database, I felt a certain kinship with Lawrence Weschler as the results appeared: “No records found.” I could not help but smile at the screen, and I came to the conclusion that, if this quote suits the Museum so well, it is probably that it might be yet another product of Wilson’s fantastically bizarre mind. The Museum of Jurassic Technology is far from having delivered all its mysteries, and perhaps it is only for the best.

## Illustrations:



Fig. 1: David Wilson, *Bernard Maston Donald, Donald R. Griffith, and the Deprong Mori of the Tripiscum Plateau*, 1992, Museum of Jurassic Technology, Los Angeles (Bernard Maston, Donald R. Griffith, and the Deprong Mori of the Tripiscum Plateau exhibit at the Museum of Jurassic Technology - Credit MJT).



1.5 "...eternally frozen in a mass of solid lead."

Fig. 2 : Artist Unknown, *Eternally frozen in a mass of solid lead*, The Museum of Jurassic Technology, Los Angeles.



Fig.3 : Davild Wilson, *Dozo Dwelling*, Museum of Jurassic Technology, Los Angeles.





Fig. 4: *The World is Bound With Secret Knots: The Life and Works of Athanasius Kircher* exhibit, 1992, Museum of Jurassic Technology, Los Angeles (*The World Is Bound With Secret Knots, The Life and Works of Athanasius Kircher, 1602-1680, Museum of Jurassic Technology* - Credit Jennifer Bastian).



Fig. 5: David Wilson, *Divination Table*, 1992, Museum of Jurassic Technology, Los Angeles (*Divination Table* from the exhibit, *The World is Bound with Secret Knots - The Life and Works of Athanasius Kircher, 1602-1680, Museum of Jurassic Technology* - Credit Jennifer Bastian).



Fig. 6: *Madelena Delani* exhibit, 1992, Museum of Jurassic Technology, Los Angeles (Madelena Delani Room at the Museum of Jurassic Technology - Credit MJT).

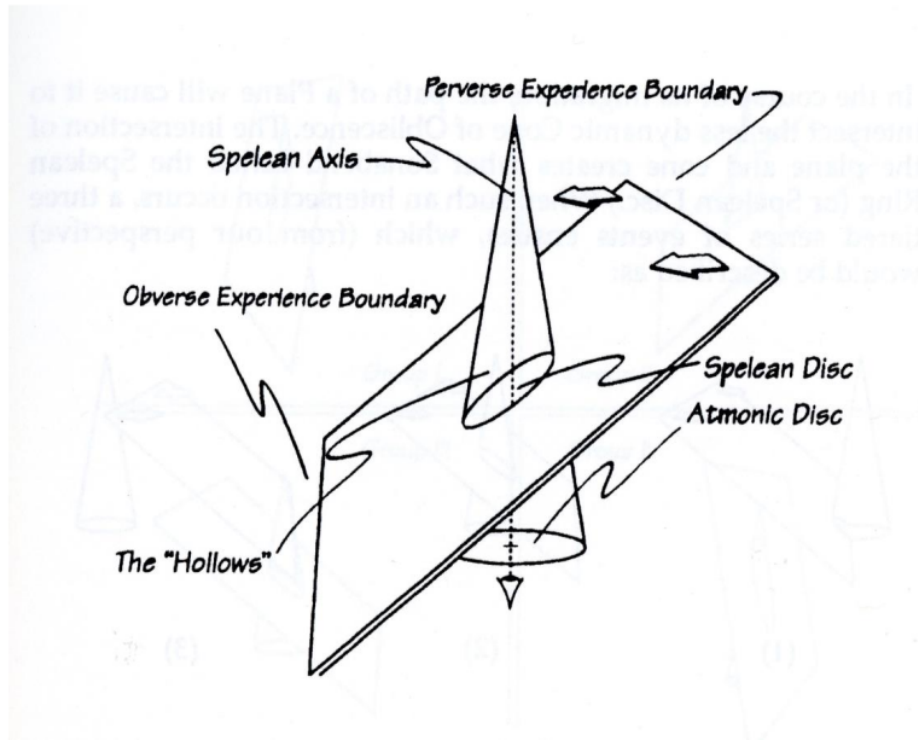


Fig. 7: Geoffrey Sonnabend, *Model of Obliscence* detailing the basic elements of cone, plane, and discs, The Museum of Jurassic Technology, Los Angeles.

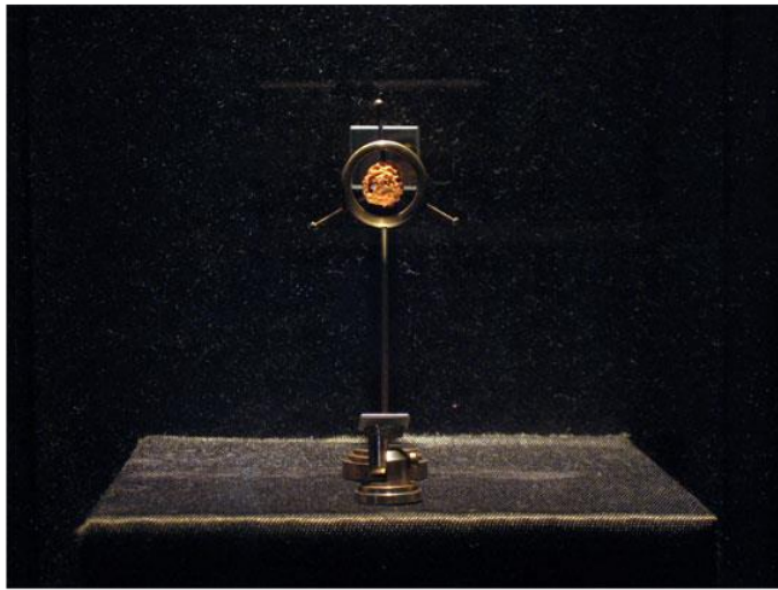


Fig. 8: Artist Unknown, *Fruit-stone Carving*, date unknown, Museum of Jurassic Technology, Los Angeles (Fruit-stone Carving at the Museum of Jurassic Technology – Credit MJT).



Fig. 9: Artist unknown, *Ferrante Imperato's museum in Naples*, from Imperato's *Dell'Historia Naturale di Ferrante Imperato Napolitano*, 1599, engraving, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.





Fig. 10: Artist unknown, *Fruit-stone carvings*, 17<sup>th</sup> century, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

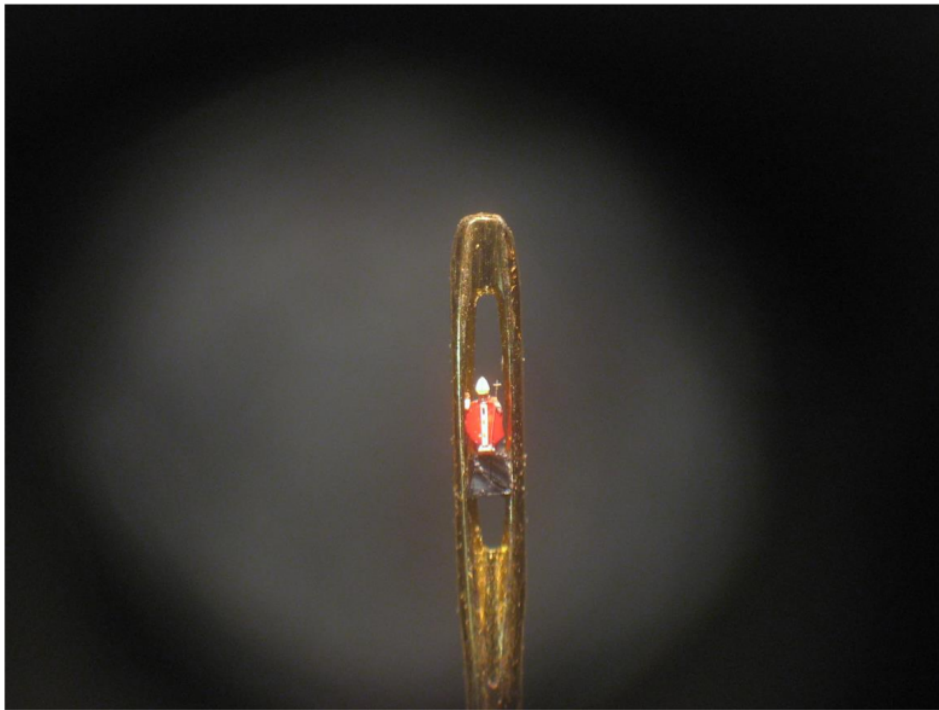


Fig. 11: Hagop Sandaljian, *Pope John Paul II*, circa 1980, dust, lint, hair, and paint, Museum of Jurassic Technology, Los Angeles (Detail view (2) of a microminiature sculpture of Pope John Paul II, by Hagop Sandaldjian - Credit Jennifer Bastian).

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