

## **Mark Dion's Surrealist Legacy-**

The creation of a mock bureau for surrealist research within The Manchester Museum brings to the surface points of intersection between Mark Dion and surrealism that have been present, though latent, in the evolution of his work up until now. These affinities or resonances are less a matter of influence than they are the product of a convergent set of interests and artistic strategies uniting the historical dada and surrealist avant-gardes with the field of contemporary art practice. Once that is recognised, the sequence of events that led to Dion's involvement in this project begins to shed the appearance of a merely fortuitous encounter and, true to surrealist belief, takes on an air of ineluctability.

Don't look for lobster telephones or other cheap surrealist clichés in Dion's *Bureau*. The link operates on another level, one that can be recognised from Walter Benjamin's statement that the surrealists were the first to discover a revolutionary potential in the obsolete and the outmoded, in the material by-products and refuse of modernity.<sup>1</sup> Dion has spoken before of his admiration for Benjamin's writing on the ethos of collecting and other topics and some of his former mentors have been active in the Benjaminian re-reading of surrealism. It would be not inaccurate to describe Dion as close to Benjamin who was close to surrealism. Self-consciously following in the surrealists' footsteps, Dion and his assistants on this project scoured the flea markets of Manchester looking for such things as a fireplace mantle and picture frames. The office furniture, including an opulent bureau desk, was retrieved from university stores where it had been discarded to gather dust. Books that now fill the shelves of the *Bureau* were earmarked for the incinerator – Dion offers all these things a safe haven and a stay of execution. An ornate gilt-covered clock requisitioned from the director's office sits resplendent atop a tall cabinet. The decorative excess of this object evokes a pre-industrial era before the march of modernity had dictated a sleeker, more functional design. It is quite strange that such a blatant anachronism can still keep time. Paradoxically, it is not the stuffed animals and other natural history specimens in the *Bureau* but rather the old-fashioned instruments that speak most poignantly of extinction. Cumbersome, with solid feet to support their huge weight, they are the woolly mammoths of the technological age. Drawer

upon drawer filled with exquisitely beautiful but now useless glass slides were found by Dion as he trawled through the Museum; some of these slides have been sequestered inside the *Bureau* but are hidden from view in cabinets that are a veritable treasure trove stuffed full of whacky and surprising things. Teaching models depicting flowers with the reproductive parts exposed, some carved of wood and others moulded from delicate coloured wax, are a reminder of the role museums of natural history played in educating past generations of children about the birds and the bees. These obsolete pedagogic aids are granted a new life in Dion's *Bureau*. Huddled together in a cabinet like one of Max Ernst's forest paintings, they are imbued with a fantastical libidinal energy. What seems like an over-riding concern with the theme of obsolescence may have been conditioned by the fact that the Museum only recently underwent a massive refurbishment affecting office space as well as public galleries. This root and branch modernisation coincided with the retirement of a number of older curators who took with them a lifetime of experience. Hence one can think of the *Bureau* as a snapshot or memento of a mode of curatorial practice that Dion might have felt was in danger of being irretrievably lost.

Benjamin's views about the outmoded in the famous surrealism essay are anticipated in an earlier passage from *One-Way Street* where he talks about the magnetic attraction that detritus has for children and of their capacity to fabricate alternative, more intuitive worlds from the leftovers of the adult one. 'In using these things,' Benjamin writes, 'they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artefact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one.'<sup>2</sup> One suspects that Dion, who has built an international reputation for museum-based interventions and fieldwork projects that playfully confound our expectations of authoritative knowledge associated with such disciplines as archaeology and natural history, would not be disdainful of a comparison with children's play. Viewed through the looking glass, as it were, the *Bureau* beckons to us as a place of fun and fantasy. It is less a drab modern office than a doll's house and Dion's total immersion in first selecting things and then arranging the space was not unlike a child at play. Taking care to select representative artefacts from each of the numerous departments in the

museum, Dion has created in the *Bureau* a sort of museum in miniature within the larger one. But it is an entirely different cosmogony from the neat, ordered understanding of the world proffered in the museum's public displays. Sifting through the collections with a surrealist eye has revealed an alternative universe of imaginative and analogical connections between things. Comprehensive taxonomies of the natural world invariably produce their own refuse: hybrids and monsters that fudge categories and fail to fit in. A platypus in the *Bureau* serves as a reminder of how the discovery of this antipodean oddity confounded the supposedly universal classificatory schemes drawn up in Europe. In her book, *The Playpus and the Mermaid*, Harriet Ritvo notes that *nondescript* was once a capacious category in early zoological nomenclatures, but as the zeal for ordering the natural world gained the upper hand the imprecision of such a term could no longer be tolerated.<sup>3</sup> What has happened in practice is that the curios and misfits (prized by collectors who created the cabinets of curiosities that are a forerunner of modern museums) that defy ready assimilation into the museological order are relegated to museum stores and backrooms. Dion's *Bureau* has given temporary sanctuary to assorted freaks and monsters, to the merely strange or unclassifiable, which have all re-emerged from their hiding places.<sup>4</sup> Surprise, delight and even terror have reclaimed their rights.

Surrealism can be regarded as a fund of still viable strategies available to be deployed by an artist whose task is to interrogate, albeit light-heartedly, the processes of knowledge production in the museum. Dion has spoken before of his desire to 'turn the museum inside out' by putting the backrooms on display. We can think of that as a return of the repressed. He can be understood as performing a kind of archaeology of knowledge which exposes the irrational foundations of reason and logic. The selection of bizarre captions reproduced in this book, none of which is made up, is testament to this approach. An enjoyable afternoon was spent plucking these randomly from a bag and a collective decision was reached about each one, whether it should be included or not. The procedure was not unlike a surrealist game and the end result, a sort of chance poem, may be judged not unworthy of them. Dion's obsession with tables, keys and captions, with the arbitrariness of connections between words and things, stems in part from his reading of Michel Foucault's *Les Mots et les choses*, but perhaps also

indirectly, via Foucault's interest in René Magritte's provocative alliance of word and image, from surrealism.<sup>5</sup> The lack of any discernible correspondence between descriptive captions and items in the *Bureau* to which they ostensibly refer is one of the means by which Dion – in a manner akin to Magritte – subverts our expectations of taxonomic order.

The fact that Dion's practice is by and large situated *within* the museum has dictated his choice of tactics. Like an organism, his means, which might best be described as chameleonesque, have evolved in perfect adaptation to their environment. Mimetism is one of his preferred stratagems. So effective, in fact, is the *Bureau* in melding seamlessly with its institutional setting that a visitor coming upon it without warning might be excused for thinking that it was just another one of the Museum's offices. That indeed was the intent. Improbable though it sounds, the mimetic behaviour of insects and other animals affords a useful analogy for thinking about Dion's art practice, as can be seen by turning to a series of reflections on this subject by Roger Caillois that began with an article he published in the surrealist journal *Minotaure* in 1934.<sup>6</sup> Relevant to our concerns is the emphasis Caillois places on the relationship to space in his account of insect mimetism. An organism that merges with its surroundings through camouflage is, he writes, devoured by space. Particularly suggestive is his description of the mimetic insect as a sort of *photograph-sculpture* and also the fact that mimetism is an operation that takes place predominately in a visual register. Caillois distinguishes various functions of mimetism which can be either defensive or offensive in motivation, or both. Whereas camouflage aims at invisibility, in other situations an insect might seek to frighten or intimidate a predator or rival with eye-spots (ocelli) on its wings or bright colourings or scary protruberances. Caillois has another category of *travesti* where an insect pretends to be another species. From the outset it is evident that Caillois is not interested in animal mimetism for its own sake but in relation to specific human propensities. In his book *Man, Play, and Games* (1961), Caillois ascribes to a mimetic instinct the origins of human play where it involves dressing up, disguise or masquerade.

Dion, in common with the surrealists, is fascinated by the behaviour of insects. Breton was a passionate butterfly collector and had his collections displayed on the walls of his apartment where they rubbed shoulders with surrealist art works. Both Dion and the surrealists were moved by the writings of the popular entomologist J-H. Fabre whose ten volume opus, *Souvenirs entomologiques*, was the subject of a homage by Dion. Here it is only possible to indicate very sketchily the myriad ways in which mimetism can be viewed as a resource for the visual artist.<sup>7</sup> Very obviously, installation art grants priority to space over objects: whether a physical setting or, as in more recent mutations of site-specificity, discursive or institutional spaces. Spaces in the latter sense are clearly at the forefront of Dion's concerns and it is meaningless to think about his work apart from the environments in which they are situated. Less abstractly, the fabulous wallpaper in the *Bureau* draws attention to space and activates surfaces in a manner that recalls the surface markings of an animal. Both can be understood as semiotically encoded. Another salient aspect of Dion's practice is the attention to process and a concomitant performative dimension. He loves putting on a white lab coat (one hangs in the corner of the *Bureau*). The simple act of dressing-up effaces the persona of the artist who is dispersed in the multiple guises of 'the expert'. When Dion pretends to be a natural scientist or an archaeologist he plays on our expectations with consummate skill such that even a professional trained in these disciplines can express bafflement at his meticulous enactment.<sup>8</sup> Another typical ruse of Dion's is a deadpan humour that poises the work ambiguously between parody and endorsement. By (almost) camouflaging art as science within the space of the museum Dion has rediscovered in mimetism an effective and flexible means for ambushing forms of cultural authority.<sup>9</sup>

The surrealists were intrigued by coincidences. The unfolding of this project has been peppered with them. Dion only became aware of the original Bureau de recherches surréalistes *after* he had already conceived the idea of creating a bureau within the Museum. The door as a freestanding motif in previous installations by Dion can be compared with any number of doors in Marcel Duchamp's work, including the famous barn door of his most complex and enigmatic installation, *Étant donnés...*, beyond which lies a scene arranged like a window display or diorama that confronts the unsuspecting viewer when they

peer through two small holes in the door. But surely Dion had no inkling that Breton referred to *Nadja* as 'a book with a banging door' when he formulated designs for the present volume? Once the bureau idea took root, a back and forth dialogue and process of reflection ensued that both enriched Dion's conception *and* prompted new historical perspectives on the bureau established by the surrealists. On the model of Dion's installation practice, we are disposed now to think of it as a proto-conceptual 'work' and the activities that took place under its auspices as performative in nature. An additional historical echo lies behind Dion's *Bureau*, namely the consulting room of Sigmund Freud which is alluded to most overtly by the Egyptian figurines above the desk that recall Freud's collection of antiquities. Dion's conflation of these memories is entirely justified since the surrealists were at the forefront of the reception of psychoanalysis. It is curious, though, that the first-hand account we have of Breton's one and only meeting with Freud in 1921 conflicts sharply with existing photographs of that supremely auratic space. He reports despondently: 'I find myself in the presence of a little old man with no style who receives clients in a shabby office worthy of the neighbourhood G.P.'<sup>10</sup> Breton's biographer can only infer that his impressions were coloured by disappointment at Freud's seeming incomprehension of the avant-gardist project and his failure to respond except in polite pleasantries to Breton's earnest entreaties. In the context of the *Bureau*, the allusions to Freud underscore our sense of this place as a setting for fantasy, or even a dream space, where each and every object is ripe for symbolic decoding.

When Dion insisted on referring to 'legacy' in the singular on the door of his *Bureau* some of us were nonplussed. Was this an innocent mistake? Or a Freudian slip? But that is unlikely since every other detail of the *Bureau* appears to have been minutely pondered. Maybe it is Dion's way of saying that he, and no one else, is surrealism's true legacy. Certainly in terms of the multiplicity of reflections that the *Bureau* prompts on historical surrealism and its relevance to contemporary object-based and installation art practice he has no comparable rivals.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism. The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1929), in *Reflections. Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1986), pp.177-192.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'One-Way Street' (1924-28), in *Reflections*, pp.68-69.

<sup>3</sup> Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

<sup>4</sup> A six-legged hamster mounted on a satin-covered wood base looks as though it once occupied pride of place in a cabinet of curiosity. Surrealism can be credited with having pointed the way to a current revival of interest in the *wunderkammer* as a pre-scientific form of museological display.

<sup>5</sup> A first version of Foucault's essay on Magritte, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, appeared in 1968. *Les Mots et les choses* (translated as *The Order of Things*) followed in 1970.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia' (1934), translated by John Shepley, *October* (winter 1984), pp.58-74. Caillois returns to this topic in *Man, Play and Games* (1961) and *Le Mimétisme animal* (1963).

<sup>7</sup> I intend to survey the impact within surrealism of Caillois' articles on mimetism more fully elsewhere: André Breton's object assemblage, *Le Petit mimétique* (1936), evidently refers to this source, as do a whole series of works by Max Ernst including *The Nymph Echo* (1936) and *La joie de vivre* (1936) that depict hybrid bird-insect-human creatures camouflaged in natural settings consisting of a super-abundant foliage.

<sup>8</sup> See Colin Renfrew, 'It May be Art but is it Archaeology? Science as Art and Art as Science,' in *Archaeology*, edited by Alex Coles and Mark Dion (London, 1999), pp.13-23.

<sup>9</sup> Nature and culture are mutable categories for Dion whose art practice transacts a continual exchange between them. Dion has produced a series of images of birds screen-printed with the fabric camouflage patterns of military fatigues. This series of works which stems from projects on the theme of urban ecology plays on camouflage as both natural and artificial.

<sup>10</sup> André Breton, 'Interview with Doctor Freud' (1921), *The Lost Footsteps [Les Pas perdus]*, trans. Mark Polizotti (Lincoln, 1996), p.70.