

Lisa Graiose Corrin Miwon Kwon Norman Bryson

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# Mark Dion



**Miwon Kwon** Was your move to New York in 1982 a beginning point of sorts?

**Mark Dion** This might sound kind of formulaic, but I'd say there were three major stages to my not so sentimental education. The first was attending the Art School of the University of Hartford, which was a giant leap for me considering my working-class background. My folks were intelligent and supportive, but coming from a small coastal town across the river from the industrial seaport of New Bedford, Massachusetts, I grew up with almost no access to fine art. I was eighteen before I saw my first art exhibition – Chardin – in Boston. After two minutes at the Hartford Art School, I realized how ignorant I was about art. So in addition to my classes, I got a job as an assistant in the slide library and asked a lot of questions.

The next stage was moving to New York and attending the School of the Visual Arts and then the Whitney Independent Study Program. There I met many of my best friends and extremely generous teachers like Tom Lawson, Craig Owens, Martha Rosler, Joseph Kosuth, Barbara Kruger and Benjamin Buchloh. They were amazingly smart, tough and fiercely protective of us when we needed it. The third stage took the form of my travels in the forests of Central America. That led to my renewed interest in the biological sciences, which I studied at home and at the City College of New York.

**Kwon** It's one thing to see the art world as a fascinating place of new ideas and another to believe that you have something meaningful to say in that world or engage it in a productive dialogue. When did that shift occur?

**Dion** By the time I got out of the Whitney Program in 1985, I sort of knew how to be an artist, because I had been provided with dozens of different models of what artists do and how they do it. But I hadn't figured out where or how I was going to apply the conceptual tools I had acquired. That came much later when I returned to what I was initially interested in long before school: environmentalism, ecology and ideas about nature. In the slick world of Conceptual and media-based art of the early 1980s, no one seemed interested in problems of nature. So it took me some time to get back to it as a viable area for critical and artistic investigation. I had a lot of unlearning to do also.

**Kwon** Can you talk a bit about your early institutional critique projects coming out of the School of Visual Arts and the Independent Study Program?

**Dion** During my studies, Gregg Bordowitz and I were very close, and we hashed out a lot of ideas together, especially those concerning art and its possibilities. At the time, we were excited by the debates around documentary – the problematics of telling the 'truth'. We were focused on film: the work of Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin in particular, as well as Peter Wollen, Laura Mulvey and Chris Marker, and the photography of Allan Sekula, Martha Rosler and others. These people had an enormous influence on us as we tried to imagine an expanded documentary practice. While the belief in truth as unmediated authenticity had waned, there still remained the task of describing the world. Some of my early projects like *This Is a Job for FEMA, or Superman at Fifty* (1988), *I'd Like to Give the World a Coke* (1986), and *Toys 'R' U.S.* (1986) were attempts to translate critical strategies from the field of documentary film and photography to an installational or sculptural field.



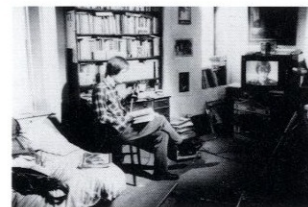
**Jean-Luc Godard**

*Letter to Jane*  
1972  
52 mins., colour and black and white  
Filmstill



**Jean-Pierre Gorin**

*Tout va bien*  
1972  
95 mins., colour  
Filmstill



**Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen**

*Riddles of the Sphinx*  
1977  
95 mins., colour  
Filmstill



**Chris Marker**

*Sans Soleil*  
1982  
100 mins., colour  
Filmstill

**This Is a Job for FEMA, or  
Superman at Fifty, from 'The Pop  
Project Part IV'**

1988

Superman posters and comics,  
desk, typewriter, telephone,  
shoes, hat, briefcase,  
newspapers, nameplate, portable  
radio, books, bookends, in-tray,  
paper, plastic wastepaper bin,  
peanut butter, dark blue suit,  
coffee mugs

Dimensions variable

Installation, The Clocktower, New  
York



**Martha Rosler**

The Bowery in Two Inadequate  
Descriptive Systems

1974-75

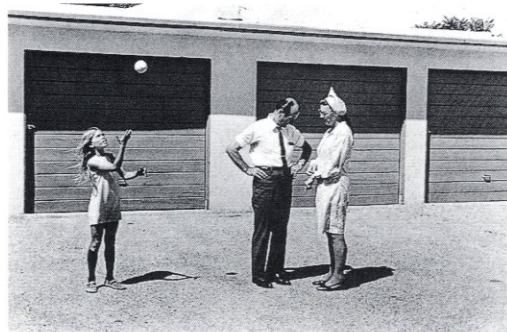
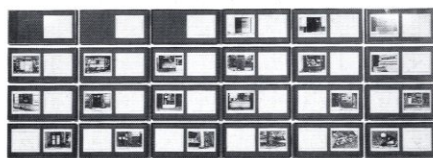
45 black and white photographs  
20 x 25 cm each, mounted on 24  
black matte panels; 130 x 381 cm  
overall

**Allan Sekula**

From 'Aerospace Folktales'

1973

Black and white photographs with  
three separate unsynchronized  
voice recordings



**Kwon** How did such concerns lead to what you're known for now, which is art that deals with cultural representations of nature?

**Dion** It came about as a result of living a dual life. In my 'work' time, I was doing gruelling research to develop various installations like *Relevant Foreign Policy Spectrum (From Farthest Right to Center Right)* (1987) and others. In my 'off' time, I continued to pursue my interest in nature, adding to my personal collections of insects and curiosities, taking trips to the tropics, beaches, salt marshes in Long Island or natural history museums. It wasn't until I began reading a lot of nature writing and scientific journalism that I stumbled onto Stephen Jay Gould, who opened up a huge window for me. Here was someone applying the same critical criterion implicit in the art I aspired to make – which can loosely be described as Foucaultian – to problems in the reception of evolutionary biology. It became very clear to me that nature is one of the most sophisticated arenas for the production of ideology. Once I realized that, the wall between my two worlds dissolved.

**Kwon** So what projects followed that revelatory moment?

**Dion** The first works were the *Extinction* series, *Black Rhino, with Head* (1989) and *Concentration* (1989), which explored the problems of environmental disruption in relation to colonial history. It was in these works that I first made use of the shipping crate as a way of addressing the international traffic of material and ideologies and myself. These works were made for shows in Belgium, which has a particularly pernicious relation to Africa as



well as a disregard for issues of animal importation and endangered species protection. In both works I was looking at a complex system, trying to examine how the current loss of biological diversity through extinction could be seen as a protracted effect of colonialism, the Cold War, and 'Band-Aid' development schemes. Collaborations with Bill Schefferine, like *Under the Verdant Carpet*, also pointed to the impossibility of untangling any single strand from a web of relations; here we literally compacted ideas on top of each other in a way that mirrored that entanglement.

During my travels in the Central American tropics, I became very concerned with the natural and cultural problems around tropical ecology. On my first visit to a tropical rainforest, I was overwhelmed by its complexity and beauty. The alienness of the jungle, its awesome vitality – I was so impressed. I remember taking a shit during a hike in the bush and having titanic dung beetles and a dozen different flying insects descending down on it before I could get my pants up. What a place!

Anyway, even though they make up only 6-7% of the earth's land mass, tropical rainforests contain well over half of all living species. They are amazing laboratories of evolution, the greenhouses of biological diversity. At the same time, they are enormously affected by postcolonial politics, global economics, sovereignty issues and northern fantasies of paradise and green-hell. In the 1980s, tropical forest debates were like a microcosm of the deepening divide between countries of the northern and southern hemispheres. They were also a map of our assumptions, desires and projections about what constitutes nature.

**Extinction Series: Black Rhino with Head**

1989  
Wooden crates, stencilled lettering, colour photographs, rhino head, wood chips, map of Africa  
Dimensions variable

**Extinction Series: Black Rhino with Head (detail)**

1989

**Kwon** What did you think an artist or an artwork could do in the face of such conditions?

**Dion** What a question! Well, one of the fundamental problems is that even if scientists are good at what they do, they're not necessarily adept in the field of representation. They don't have access to the rich set of tools, like irony, allegory and humour, which are the meat and potatoes of art and literature. So this became an area of exploration for Schefferine and me. Also, the ecological movement has huge blindspots in that it is extremely uncritical of its own discourse. At the time, it was evoking images of Eden and innocence, calling for a back-to-nature ethos. So part of what we did was critique these ideologically suspect, culturally entrenched ideas about nature.

The parade Schefferine and I made for American Fine Arts, Co., in New York called the *Wheelbarrows of Progress*, was largely a response to the shockingly bone-headed ways of thinking which we witnessed around 'green' issues. Each wheelbarrow carried a weighty folly – from the Republican dismantlement of the renewable energy program, to wildlife conservation groups pandering to the public with pandas.

*Tropical Rainforest Preserves* (1990) is a good example of a response to a double phenomena. On the one hand, zoos in North America were creating rainforests inside cities as special exhibits. On the other hand, ecological groups were trying to export notions of a national park – locking up natural resources in order to protect them. Our piece was meant to reflect on such conditions in a humorous way by making an absurdly small reserve that was 'captured' and mobile, comically domesticated and reminiscent of the Victorian mania for ferns, aquariums and dioramas.

**Wheelbarrows of Progress, with William Schefferine**  
1990  
Installation, American Fine Arts, Co., New York





**SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE**

FOOD CROPS - m...  
 shew, mize, sweet potato, ...  
 tree crops - m...  
 ...  
 LIVESTOCK - m...  
 ...  
 OTHER COMMODITIES - m...  
 ...

In tropical Latin America overall, 7 percent of land owners possess over 60 percent of the arable land.

**Tropical Rainforest Preserves  
(Mobile Version), from  
'Wheelbarrows of Progress', with  
William Schefferine**  
1990  
Tropical vegetation, soil, stones,  
presstype on red enamel  
wheelbarrow  
wheelbarrow, 63.5 x 68.5 x 141 cm

**Survival of the Cutest  
(Who Gets on the Ark?), from  
'Wheelbarrows of Progress', with  
William Schefferine**  
1990  
Toy stuffed animals, white enamel  
on red steel, wood and rubber  
wheelbarrow  
wheelbarrow, 63.5 x 68.5 x 141 cm



*right, Acid Precipitation, from  
'Wheelbarrows of Progress', with  
William Schefferine  
1990*

Bullhead catfish, Adirondack map,  
Alberta tree, water, water filter,  
silicon blue enamel wheelbarrow  
wheelbarrow, 63.5 × 68.5 × 141 cm

*opposite, top, The Big Payback,  
from 'Wheelbarrows of Progress',  
with William Schefferine  
1990*

Toy truck, torch, saw, funnel,  
tools, printed matter, nails, rubber  
tubing, vice, clamp, spraypaint  
can, cap, bumperstickers,  
presstype and ink on black enamel  
wheelbarrow  
wheelbarrow, 63.5 × 68.5 × 141 cm

*opposite, bottom, Iron Fist for  
Soft Energy, from 'Wheelbarrows  
of Progress',  
with William Schefferine  
1990*

Solar chips, books, printed matter,  
feathers, bones, oil, tar, presstype  
and ink on white enamel  
wheelbarrow  
wheelbarrow, 63.5 × 68.5 × 141 cm







**Selections from the Endangered Species List (the Vertebrata), or Commander McBrag Taxonomist,**  
with William Schefferine  
1989

Desktop, typewriter, plaster dinosaur, index cards, books, potted cactus, candlestick, candle, ceramic bowl, plastic animal figurines, spoon, butterfly net, wooden collector's case, canvas bag, framed picture, drawings, pen, shell, cork, animal head, tape player, nautilus shell, glass vials, dissection kit  
Dimensions variable

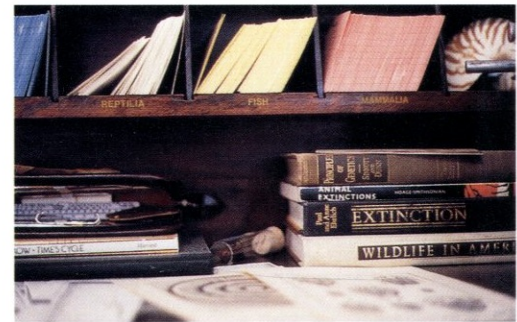


**Kwon** What is your assessment of such projects in hindsight? To me, they seemed very didactic.

**Dion** I think our projects were more complex than they may have seemed at first glance, less didactic than they appeared. They never spoke monolithically, and often had counter-arguments built into them. For instance, *Selections from the Endangered Species List (the Vertebrata) or Commander McBrag Taxonomist* (1989) tried to visualize two different processes that have a dialectical relationship to one another – the task of naming animals as one ‘discovers’ them (as in Linnaeus), and naming animals as they die off and disappear (as in the endangered species list). It’s like Noah hunting down all the animals he saved on the ark. We wanted our work to convey the reality of contradictions like that. Moreover, all the works contained massive amounts of detail and layering. Perhaps they were didactic, but at least they weren’t boring. Humour was an important factor to the success of these works.

**Kwon** In the early 1990s, the New York art world classified your practice under the banner of ‘green’ art. But it seems you’ve moved away from overt references to eco-politics in favour of studies of cultural institutions, specifically the natural history museum, as well as particular modes of display, such as curiosity cabinets.

**Dion** I think the politics of representation as it involves the museum has always been part of my practice. As I see it, artists doing institutional critiques of museums tend to fall into two different camps. There are those who see the museum as an irredeemable reservoir of class ideology – the very notion of the museum is corrupt to them. Then there are those who are critical of the museum not because they want to blow it up but because they want to make it a more interesting and effective cultural institution.



**Kwon** You'd be in the latter category, of course, since you're an avid collector yourself.

**Dion** Yeah, I love museums. I think the design of museum exhibitions is an art form in and of itself, on par with novels, paintings, sculptures and films. This doesn't mean that I don't acknowledge the ideological aspect of the museum as a site of ruling-class values pretending to be public. Nevertheless, as an institution dedicated to making things, ideas and experiences available to people not based on ownership, I don't think museums are inherently bad, anymore than books or films are bad. It is also clear that people enter the museum with their own agendas. Museum visitors are not mindless subjects of ideology. I think many of them have a healthy skepticism of institutional narratives.

**Kwon** In 1990 when you interviewed Michel von Praet, one of the people responsible for the reorganization of the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, you commented: 'I'm interested in the tension between the museum's position as an educational forum and an entertainment form'. Can you describe how you explore that tension in your work?

**Dion** As sites of learning and knowledge, museums have traditionally been places of extraordinary seriousness that shut out popular culture. But now there are very concrete pressures for museums to appeal to popular taste because of dire funding situations. For example, museums in England and United States, which once had the benefit of state money, got their funding cut during the Thatcher and Reagan years to the point where they had to cannibalize themselves in order to pull in the admission-paying masses. In many countries, museums are trying to find new ways to remain economically viable as businesses. The explosion of gift shops, restaurants, entertainment programs and public outreach projects are testimony to the museum's redirection towards becoming more popular.

But a disturbing thing about these shifts is that as the museum has become more 'educational' as part of its popularization efforts, it's also become dumber. The museum seems to conceive of its audience as younger and more childlike now. Rather than a place where one might go to explore some complex questions, the museum now simplifies the questions and gives you reductive answers for them. It does all the work, so the viewer is always passive. A museum should provoke questions, not spoon-feed answers and experiences. Unfortunately, though, that seems to me what museums have become.

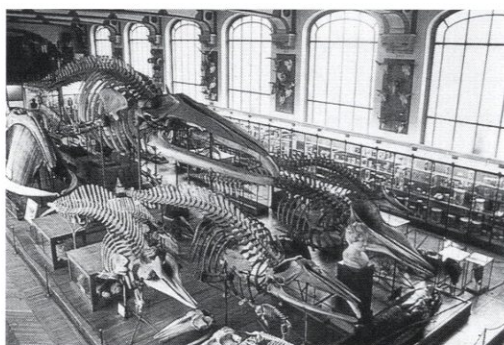
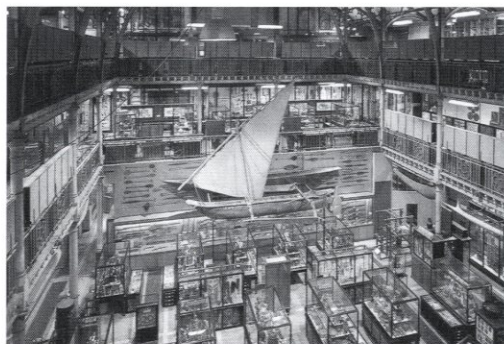
When it comes to museums, I'm an ultra-conservative. To me the museum embodies the 'official story' of a particular way of thinking at a particular time for a particular group of people. It is a time capsule. So I think once a museum is opened, it should remain unchanged as a window into the obsessions and prejudices of a period, like the Pitt Rivers in Oxford, the Museum of Comparative Anatomy in Paris and the Teyler Museum in Haarlem. If someone wants to update the museum, they should build a new one. An entire city of museums would be nice, each stuck in its own time.

But to get back to your question, I'm excited by the tension between entertainment and education in the idea of the marvellous, especially in pre-Enlightenment collections like curiosity cabinets and *wunderkammers*.

Selections from the Endangered Species List (the Vertebrata), or Commander McBrag Taxonomist, with William Schefferine (details)  
1989

Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford  
View of the interior showing the outrigger canoe from Zanzibar

Musée d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris  
View of the Gallery of Comparative Anatomy



Along with visual games, logic tricks and optical recreations, these collections attempted to rationalize the irrational. They were neither dry didactics nor mindless spectacles. They tested reason the way storerooms, flea markets and dusty old museums challenge cultural categories and generate questions today. This must sound light years away from when we spoke of documentary earlier, but somehow it's related. If an exhibition is a challenge, it is both educational and entertaining.

**Kwon** How do you provoke a sense of the marvellous or generate curiosity in our day and age?

**Dion** One thing is to tell the truth, which is by far more astounding than any fiction. (I cringe as the word 'truth' passes my lips, but I always mean it with a lower case 't'.) For example, one of the biggest problems I have with the environmental movement *and* the museum is that they intentionally mislead people for the benefit of their own pocketbooks, which is unforgivable considering they are organizations devoted to the production of knowledge.

The problem of charismatic megafauna, for instance, which Bill Schefferine and I tried to deal with in *The Survival of the Cutest* (1990) is a case in point. Generally, in order to raise money for the protection of endangered ecosystems, conservation organizations draw isolated attention to extremely attractive and photogenic animals – tigers, whales, pandas. These are not keystone species so the system won't collapse if they are taken out. Of course, all members of an ecosystem are important, but these animals are often the least critical ones, usually peripheral animals at the top of the food chain. They're not like the beaver or corals which produce systems that support other animals. Now, foregrounding charismatic animals is not so bad if you acknowledge at some point their relationship to other forms of life in the ecosystem. If the conservation effort could highlight the fact that by protecting the jaguar, we can also preserve vast areas of habitat that benefits everything in it, including us, then the focus on the 'cutest' would not be so problematic. But that's not what the conservation groups do. They haven't taken the opportunity to reveal the *real* goals. To me, that shows how much they are working against themselves.

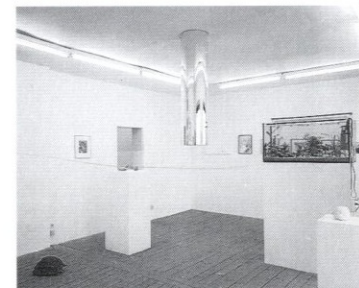
**Kwon** Which parallels the art museum culture in so far as it continues to highlight the 'charismatic' masters to draw people to the museum, to 'save' the institution, perhaps.

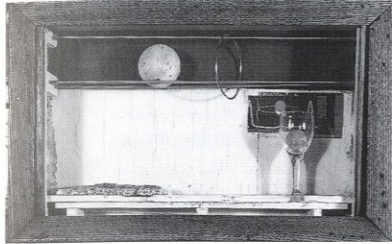
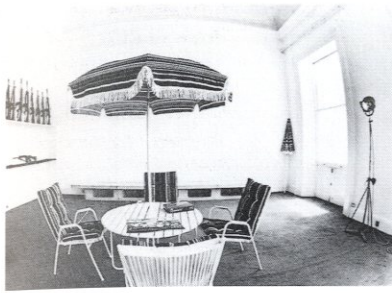
**Dion** Right. In the case of natural history museums, what you see on display, which represents only 1-10% of the entire collection, is usually remedial pandering equivalent to material in school science textbooks. But there are hundreds of people in the back rooms working with specimens and artefacts, hidden from public view. That's where the museum is really alive and interesting. They directly address questions like: what is the function of a collection? Why is it important to name things in the natural world? The museum needs to be turned inside out – the back rooms put on exhibition and the displays put into storage.

Art museums also act like butterfly collectors, always repressing context and process. We would understand Manet better, for example, if his paintings were exhibited alongside works from the academy he was reacting against,

**Marcel Broodthaers**  
Decor (A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers) XXth Century  
1975  
Picnic table, chairs, umbrella, rifles, shelves, light, assorted objects  
Dimensions variable  
Installation, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London

**Joseph Cornell**  
Eclipse Series  
c. 1960  
Wood, metal, glass, ball, starfish, nails, paper, mixed media construction  
23 x 36 x 11 cm





**Christian-Philipp Müller**  
Green Border  
1993  
Installation, Austrian Pavilion,  
Venice Biennale

**Stephan Dilleuth**  
Untitled  
1994  
Installation, Christian Nagel,  
Cologne

**Renée Green**  
Import/Export Funk Office  
1992  
Installation, Christian Nagel,  
Cologne

**Christy Rupp**  
Rat Posters  
1979  
Project for Lower Manhattan

rather than impressionist paintings from thirty years later. So I say freeze the museum's front rooms as a time capsule and open up the laboratories and storerooms to reveal art and science as the dynamic processes that they are.

**Kwon** My impression is that you're drawn more to natural history museums than art museums. Why is that?

**Dion** Natural history museums ask bigger questions about life and history. That's why I'm interested in artists who have expanded the definition of art and enriched the field by looking outside of it. Marcel Broodthaers, Robert Smithson, Joseph Beuys, Joseph Cornell, Gordon Matta-Clark ... the dead guys. That's my pantheon. Smithson is of particular interest because he forged a convergence between geology, the science of time, and critical art discourse. There is a side to Smithson that is a bit too Jungian for me, but his practice made art very expansive.

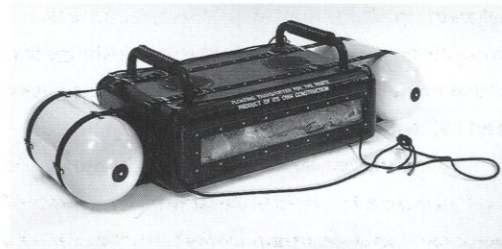
**Kwon** Who else were you looking at as a young artist?

**Dion** There were so many: Jack Goldstein, Lothar Baumgarten, Group Material, Hans Haacke, Louise Lawler, Ashley Bickerton, Vito Acconci, Ericson and Ziegler, Yvonne Rainer, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Chris Burden ... I could go on. But my peers were even more influential, like Christian-Philipp Müller, Tom Burr, Claire Pentecost, Gregg Bordowitz, Stephan Dilleuth, Art Oriente Objet, Jason Simon, Fareed Armaly, Andrea Fraser and Renée Green. Fred Wilson and David Wilson, too, although I don't know them as well personally. I share a lot with all of these artists methodologically. Then there is another group of artists who deal with representations of nature – Bob Braine, Alexis Rockman, Christy Rupp, Rachel Berwick, David Nyzio, Greg Crewdson and Michael Paha – whose methods are far from my own but with whom I feel a strong kinship. Bob, Alexis and I get together and talk like nature nerds about birds and insects. I guess in some ways the division that existed before in my life still exists, although Renée, Claire and Art Oriente Objet overlap into both worlds.

*right, top, Lothar Baumgarten*  
Installation in the Jardin  
Botánico, Caracas  
1986  
Green plaques suspended from  
perches bearing the names of 'Los  
Bucadores de El Dorado'

*right, bottom, Ashley Bickerton*  
Seascape: Transporter for the  
Waste of Its Own Construction #3  
1990  
Wood, aluminium, glass,  
fibreglass, plastic, leather, rope  
57 × 210 × 79 cm

*far right, Mierle Laderman Ukeles*  
Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks,  
Maintenance: Outside, from  
'Maintenance Art' series  
1973  
Performance at Wadsworth  
Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut



**Kwon** When I interviewed you few years ago during your preparation for *On Tropical Nature* (1991) in Venezuela, we spoke at length about the mythic figure of the naturalist both in history and in popular culture (exemplified by Indiana Jones at the time). I implied then that rather than being critical of the colonialist underpinnings of such a figure, you were playing out the role as a masculinist fantasy.

**Dion** I remember. But adopting that position for a while was perhaps the most efficient way to be critical. Distanced critique is a useful but boring tool. I like the idea of throwing myself into the fray. My role in *On Tropical Nature* was to become a magnet for critical questioning. I wasn't too interested in indicting people who lived more than a hundred years ago for being bad colonialists. There were other things relevant to the work, too, like the quincentennial celebration of Columbus' 'discovery' of America. It was important for me to distinguish between someone who ran a slave plantation and someone who spent years of their lives in extremely dangerous and tedious conditions in pursuit of knowledge. They may both be colonialists but these are hugely different endeavours.



The second of four weeks of travel in the Orinoco River basin, Venezuela, collecting materials for *On Tropical Nature* 1991

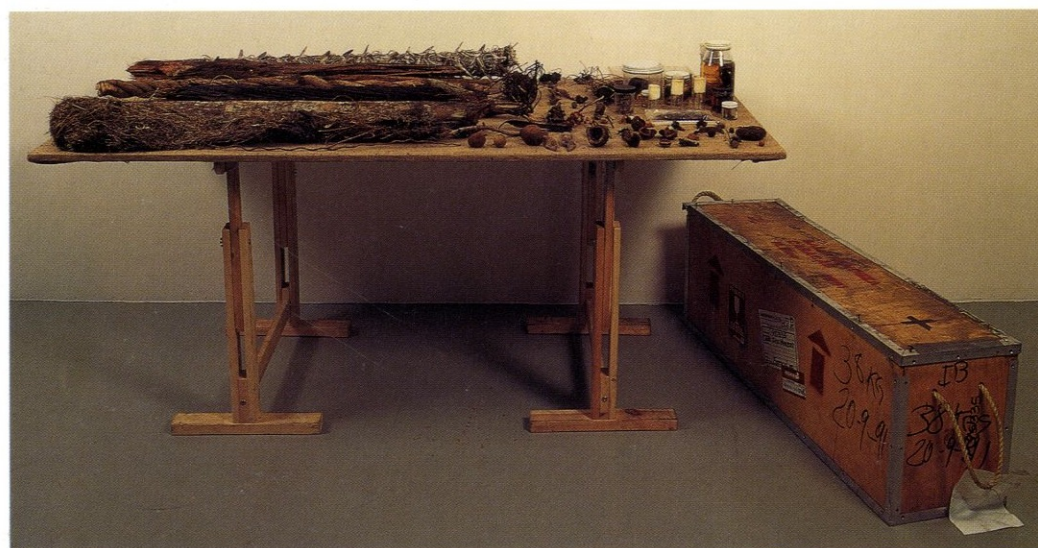
*this page and opposite,*

**On Tropical Nature**

1991

Collector's equipment, rope, string, field glasses, clothes, plant press, killing jars, spreading boards, fish spear, insect pins, chemicals, animal traps, fishing tackle, butterfly collection, specimens, gas lamp, shoes, table, crate, shovel, gloves, plastic cups, cassette tapes, adhesive tape, camera, tupperware containers, scissors set

Dimensions variable





**Kwon** I think the tendency to collapse the two is due to our tendency to describe knowledge in spatial terms, as territories.

**Dion** That's why it is doubly important to mark the differences among various types of interactions. Even among a small group of Victorian naturalists, you find vastly disparate attitudes. For example, the English mining engineer Thomas Belt (1832-73) wrote *The Naturalist in Nicaragua* (1874), which is filled with astute field observations but also interventionist logic and horrendous human prejudices. It represents the worst tendencies in the field. But his world-view is very unlike those of eccentric Charles Waterton (1782-1865) or Henry Walter Bates (1825-95) or Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913), all of whom spent long periods in the tropical jungles. They were not innocent of the prejudices of their time, but they had robust respect and appreciation for the cultures and individuals who hosted them. Bates spent eleven years in the Amazon Basin and depended greatly on the people of the interior. He owed them his life. And Wallace despised the social Darwinists who judged indigenous peoples as savages, although they had no firsthand knowledge of them.

**Kwon** In projects of the past few years, you've referenced several of these naturalists – Bates, Wallace and William Beebe. Why the focus on such figures?

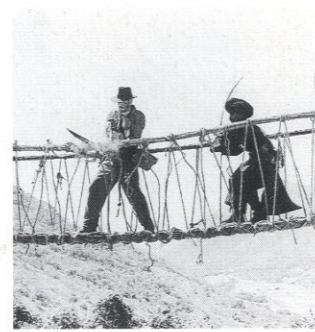
**Dion** My interest lies in trying to understand their motivations. I want to understand this thing called curiosity – a desire for knowledge that is so strong that it leads one to make incredibly irrational decisions. What is it that leads someone to leave the comforts of home, family, friends and career to go live in an unfamiliar, unpredictable and physically dangerous environment that can threaten your health and sanity, if not your life? Why choose to be culturally isolated for years in a foreign country surrounded by people from a different world? Why choose years of solitude with guarantees of nothing except maybe estrangement when you return home? These people were not eco-tourists on vacation – they literally risked their lives.

**Kwon** Do you think the motivations and desires that drive the naturalist are analogous to those of the artist?

**Dion** Somewhat. Historically, the pursuit of nature started in the laboratory, the home, the collection. Things that live at a distance were brought into one's own environment to be studied as specimens. Which is to say, what was thought to be observation of life was actually the study of death. Then came the breakthrough when naturalists became field scientists, not only observing nature's operations in its own context, but discovering nature as a system of relationships, an ecology.

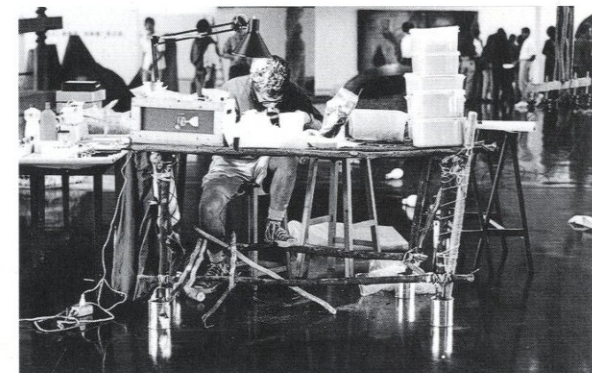
Similarly, making art is no longer confined to the institutional spaces that we've created for such activity. It's more in the 'field' now. The focus is on relations and processes – an ecology of art if you will – and not solely on decontextualized objects that are like natural specimens.

**Kwon** How has your working method changed with projects like *On Tropical Nature* (1991), *A Meter of Jungle* (1992), *The Great Munich Bug Hunt* (1993) and *A Meter of Meadow* (1995), which involve 'fieldwork'?



William Beebe  
1917

Steven Spielberg  
*Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*  
1984  
118 mins., colour  
Filmstill

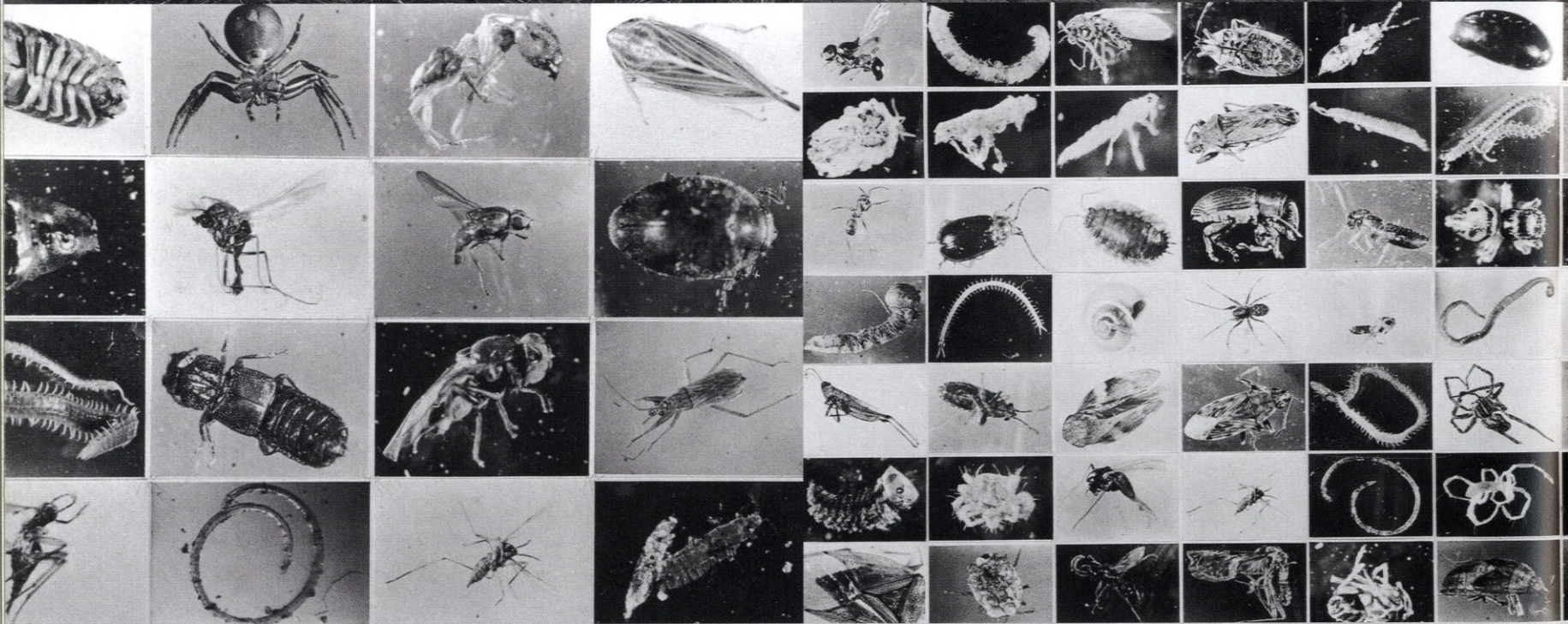
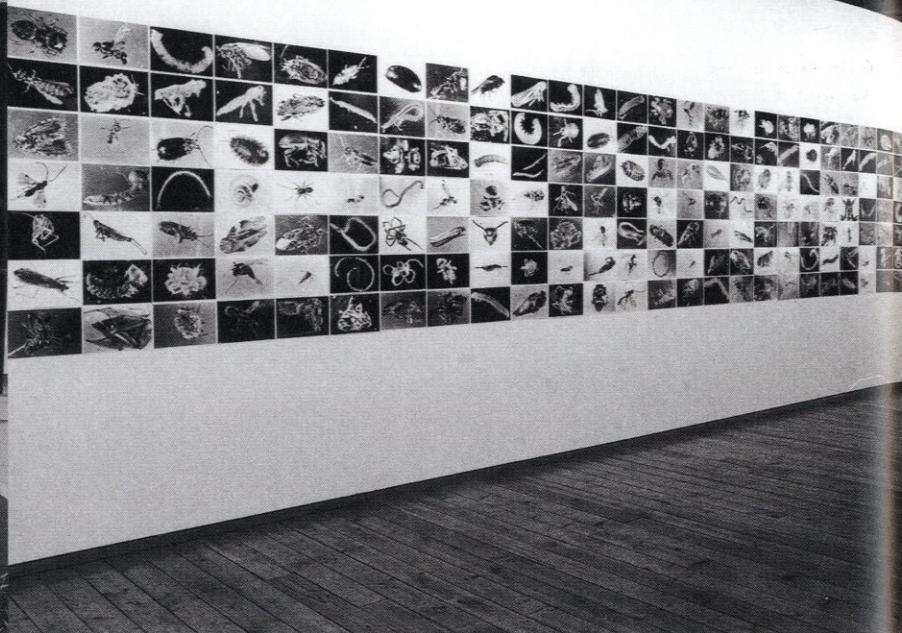
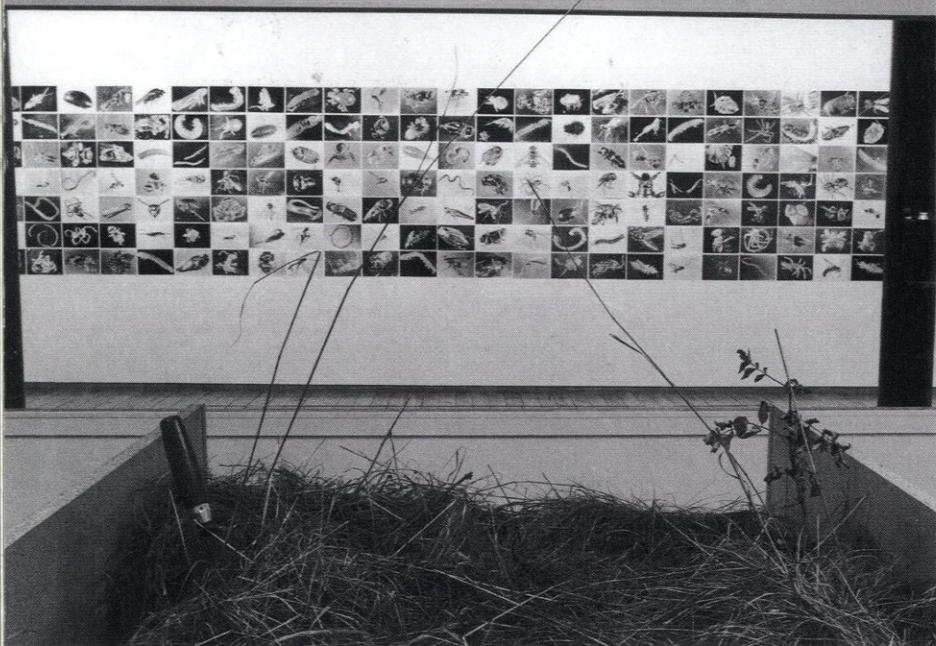


above, *A Meter of Jungle*  
1992

opposite, *A Meter of Jungle*  
1992  
Four stakes, tape  
1 x 1 m







A Meter of Meadow, from  
'Unseen Fribourg'  
1995  
289 black and white photographs  
of invertebrate samples, steel pins  
21.5 x 30.5 cm each  
Installation, FRI-ART Centre d'Art  
Contemporain, Fribourg  
(Switzerland)

Dion To me, seeing a painting is not as rewarding as seeing a painting in production. So I want to build the process into the work, to have the work exist in several stages, and to have the metamorphosis available to the viewers so that they can engage it in different ways. I'm greedy about not wasting any productive moments. That's why I will not abandon the 'fieldwork' model. In works like *A Meter of Jungle*, *History Trash Dig* or *A Meter of Meadow*, there is a performative aspect. I take raw materials out of the world and then act upon them in the space of the gallery. This process is visible to visitors during the first ten days or so of the exhibition. I may be going through a pile of leaf litter to sort out the invertebrae, or I may be trying to preserve or identify material. The process is hard to get a grip on because I'm not acting, I'm not a character, I'm not pretending to be someone else. When the collection is complete, when I've run out of space or raw material or time, the work is finished. Later a collection might be re-opened.

For instance, *On Tropical Nature* opened with empty tables, signalling to the viewers that I was working somewhere but not in the exhibition space. I was in the jungle, sending specimens back to the gallery on a weekly basis, with the expectation that, based on my prior instructions, the tables would gradually become filled with the contents of my crates. Essentially, the piece changed with the arrival of each box, which were events in themselves. With works like this and *History Trash Dig* (1995), there are multiple publics that include not only the usual art audience but the people I work with in the field and the partners who put the work together in the institution. In the project for *Sculpture Chicago* (1992-93), there was an interesting reversal of the role of the audience. The collaborators who helped shape the work were the principal public. In this project, a group of sixteen high school students formed two clubs: *The Chicago Tropical Rainforest Study Group* and *The Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group*. For the first few months we looked into the problems of rainforest conservation, culminating with a visit to the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary in Belize. Later we turned our attention to Chicago's ecology. Over the summer *Sculpture Chicago* convinced the city to give us a clubhouse in Lincoln Park. There we had a sort of resource centre where people could come to discuss ideas about art and ecology but they could also use *us* as a resource: sixteen strong energetic people available to pick up trash, plant trees, turn vacant lots into gardens ... Like all methods, though, this one has its benefits and compromises.

**Kwon** I think the kind of 'field' practice which you, along with other artists you've mentioned, have forged, constitutes an area of artistic activity that is posing the most challenging questions right now. But what are some of its problems?

Dion One of the biggest problems with this kind of practice, which some call *contexte-kunst*, is that it is virtually impossible to track the conceptual development of an artist. Normally, each show is a work rather than an exhibition of several works, which makes it difficult to compare and contrast one project to the next. All of us work in relationship to a site, but we don't necessarily work site-specifically. Someone like myself or Renée Green, we try to use each exhibition opportunity to engage our previous projects and to address past mistakes or problems. I like to have a dialogue with other things that I've done. But this kind of conceptual layering is not visible to most

people because they encounter isolated events or installations that are in fact part of a continuous development.

**Kwon** How much of that is the structural condition of this type of practice and how much of it is the laziness of the critical community to inform the art audience?

**Dion** Let's face it, no one can be expected to see an exhibition in Rome one week, another in Glasgow three weeks later, and then attend a lecture in Los Angeles five days after that. Part of the problem is definitely the condition of the practice. But because of the problem of distance, there is also very little press attention on this kind of site-oriented art.

**Kwon** Obviously, this kind of practice demands a huge amount of time and commitment from the artist – preparation and execution of the 'fieldwork', production of objects or installations, then dissemination of information about the work. But it is very demanding on the critics, too, because we have patiently to piece together fragments of information from elsewhere, usually, and follow the project over a relatively long period of time – days, months, maybe even years – as it goes through complicated transformations, generating multiple narratives.

**Dion** Information about a project is definitely not available all at once. If there has been a reluctance to address this kind of practice seriously, that's one of the reasons. And I concede it is a lot of work to try to examine or interpret such work critically. But remember, the experience I'm most interested in is not the written appraisal but the actual viewing of the work itself. How could words or photographs ever adequately describe *The Library for the Birds of Antwerp* (1993)?

**Kwon** What did you mean earlier when you said you work in relation to the site but not site-specifically?

**Dion** Site-specificity today is not that of Bochner, LeWitt, Serra or Buren, defined by the formal constraints of a location. Nor is it that of Asher and Haacke, defined as a social space enmeshed in the art-culture. It can be these things plus historical issues, contemporary political debates, the popular culture climate, developments in technology, the artist's experience of being mistreated by the hosting institution, even the seasonal migration of birds. There are different ways to define a site. And with it comes a newer understanding and appreciation of the audience. Much of today's art recognizes multiple viewer positions as it attempts to meet the non-art-world viewers halfway. When I make a work, for instance, I don't expect everyone to get everything. People versed in art history will walk away with a different set of references than someone who studied zoology. And I also don't expect everyone to work so hard at analyzing the work.

It is also important to understand the flexible way in which my peers and I think of our practice. We hold dear the belief that our production can have many different forms of expression – making a film, teaching, writing, producing a public project, doing something for a newspaper, curating or presenting a discrete work in a gallery. The differences are noted, but we see

The Great Munich Bug Hunt  
1993  
Tree, collecting cabinet,  
specimens, lab equipment  
Dimensions variable





**The Great Munich Bug Hunt**  
 (detail)  
 1993  
 Tree, collecting cabinet,  
 specimens, lab equipment  
 Dimensions variable



Civitella Ranieri, Italy, view of the castle

**History Trash Scan (Civitella Ranieri)**  
 1996  
 Found artefacts



each site as one among many at our disposal in terms of cultural work. For me, producing something with a natural history museum, a zoo or a historical society are all viable options. Of course, there is a flip side to this in that it may lead to a kind of dilettantism. And that may be a fair criticism. But for me, the dilettante is a much more interesting character historically than the expert. Some of the greatest contributions in art and science have come from dilettantes rather than professionals.

**Kwon** Has there ever been a problem of being typecast as the artist who does nature pieces? And if so, how do you respond to such prescriptive attitudes?

**Dion** On one hand, there is always a desire in the art world to see something familiar – to recognize signature styles. There is a demand that you don't be a dilettante, that you stick with one area and develop it over a long period of time. On the other hand, there is a desire for novelty. So every project has to be new and different. You're accused of being repetitive and boring if you do the same project twice.

Imagine for instance *The Great Munich Bug Hunt* in which I took a tree from the Black Forest, and, with a group of entomologists, examined the tree to remove the invertebrae. Now the same procedure could be followed in California and it would become an entirely different project, because it would involve an entirely different tree and reveal an entirely different set of insects, spiders and worms. But if I pursued a California version, someone will inevitably say that I did the project already, that they had seen it before. People's tendency to disregard differences is so automatic that it's exhausting to resist it.

Anyway, I do tend to get pigeonholed as the artist who works on themes of zoology. That's one of the reasons I made *History Trash Dig* and *History Trash Scan (Civitella Ranieri)*, which are works that superficially borrow the methodology of archaeology in order to reframe the fascination that many



Tar and Feathers  
1995  
Ink on paper  
59 x 44.5 cm



Americans have with the simultaneity of history that one encounters in older European cities. During my digs into trash dumps of previous centuries I'm not interested in one moment or type of object, but each artefact – be it yesterday's Juicy Fruit wrapper or a sixteenth-century porcelain fragment – is treated the same. Other works, like the *Bureau of Censorship*, *When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth* or *Hate Box* (a time capsule of Desert Storm propaganda produced by the private sector), also depart from the focus on issues of ecology. These works are produced out of anger and disgust, they are sort of throwbacks to my earliest projects.

Part of the reason I continue to focus on nature, though, besides the fact that it is a subject I'm most interested in, is because my work involves intensive research and I find that I can build on the things I already know. I've done enough reading now about problems of taxonomy and the history of natural sciences and ecology that my knowledge can function as a resource pool. I also enjoy trying to interpret my own obsessive relationship to nature. My mania for birds, for example – what is that about?

**Kwon** Whereas your earlier work registered a spirited energy about the possibilities of change, your most recent work seems reflective. In *Tar and Feathers* (1996), things feel downright dark and macabre.

**Dion** That's an aspect of my work that has become increasingly more defined, perhaps, but not new. If you look at my work through the lens of the grotesque and morbid, you will find them in a lot of the early projects too. *Black Rhino, with Head*, which includes a huge severed head of a rhinoceros, *Frankenstein in the Age of Biotechnology* (1991), or the first *Hallway of Extinction*, which I did in collaboration with Bob Braine, are exceedingly dark works. I guess



*Bureau of Censorship* -  
Maastricht  
1996  
Thatch, stucco, wood, glass, office  
furniture, woodburning stove,  
television aerial, assorted objects  
320 x 280 x 160 cm







Tar and Feathers  
1996  
Tree, wooden base, tar, feathers,  
various taxidermic animals  
259 x ø101.6 cm

when you dwell a lot on issues like extinction, it's hard not to become a bit macabre. In truth, I'm far more interested in Poe than in Thoreau.

The more optimistic projects like *Project for the Belize Zoo* or *The Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group* tend to have a 'real world' practicality, emphasizing productive or generative models of our relationship to nature. But more often than not, the work has tended towards the adverse aspects of our interaction with nature. In fact, I am generally pessimistic about the fact that the environmental movement has shied away from providing a more systematic critique of capitalism. It has become more corporate, divisive and collusive, missing an important opportunity to present a really meaningful challenge to the juggernaut of world market economy. Environmentalism has become eco-chic, another gizmo, another category of commodities. That has led me to a kind of disillusionment.

*Flotsam and Jetsam* is perhaps the keystone work for this sense of gloom. It expresses a kind of disbelief in the unwillingness of people to act in their own long-term interest, and was triggered by the collapse of the Atlantic fisheries. For decades biologists told fisherman that they were overharvesting and that this would cause the population to collapse, but there was an outright refusal to control their greed. *Flotsam and Jetsam* articulates a sort of sublime wonderment at the extent of our destruction. The stage is a device to coalesce the tragic and public aspects. I don't anticipate much good news on the environmental front, although it has perhaps the greatest potential to build bridges between progressive social movements.

**Kwon** Do you think your practice has become more private and subjective as a result?

**Dion** I think I've been consistent in pursuing my interest in the history of the representations of nature and exploring how concepts like chains of being, evolution, the 'wilderness' and fantasies of growth and utopia have shaped our thinking about nature. These days, the dominant idea guiding what we think of as nature is influenced by environmentalism, especially in relation to conservation, so my work has tried to challenge its effects.

You may be right, though, in that my work has become more hermetic in recent years, or at least more esoteric. In the past couple of years, I've been studying pre-Enlightenment traditions of organizing nature such as curiosity cabinets, which were in many ways the nursery of modern science and certainly the forerunner of the museum. In going back to the seventeenth century, I'm trying to imagine how things could have been different, to follow branches on the tree of knowledge that died of dry rot.

overleaf, *Flotsam and Jetsam*  
(The End of the Game)  
1994  
Boat, sand, wooden platform,  
chair, electric fan, net, assorted  
beach debris  
Installation, De Vleeshal,  
Middelburg, The Netherlands

