

WILD WORLDING WUNDERKAMMER WORKSHOP

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Inspired by the carrier bag theory of fiction let us look for alternate ways to do our work. We do this by worlding: by attuning to and melting into the subject(s) of our research; gathering and gaining situated knowledges, interwoven with multiple threads of imagination and desire. But then gathering and gaining is based on collecting: data, objects, subjects, situations, relations; submitted into an order of things, shifted into storages, from time to time put on display. Imagination and desire are stripped off in this process and stored separately, if at all. That's why we need a different mind-set, a different set of methods, and a different set of tools. For our findings and our creations, for our research and our inspiration we will build a wunderkammer. Not the old cabinet of curiosities based on items taken away from others, other places, stolen from life. But a new structure for our wild-at-heart pluriverse; one that is our workshop and our toolbox rather than a storage. One that is probably closer to an assembly, a parliament, a party, a network, a collaboratory for all kinds of agencies and for agencies of all kinds.

wunderkammer; knowledge building; tools; workshopology;

1. An Invitation

Remember yourself as a child curiously exploring the wonderful, wonderful world? A world of spaces and places to discover, crowded with living beings and with things, with spirits and with energies, almost always in continuous transformations, only for a few precious moments standing still, so you could try to catch up, to connect, to communicate, and sometimes also to collect: to choose something to take with you and to keep – for sure in your heart, in your mind, but sometimes also in your hands, in your bag, to be carried home. Here you put your treasures in boxes and jars, and in an order. Some were kept on hold, hidden, visible for your eyes only, others were proudly presented on your shelf: your wonderful, wonderful Wunderkammer – only that you did not know yet the word to name it. Nor what that really meant. Every item in your collection had its origins, its story – and you had become a storyteller, happily ignoring the loss each of your treasures embodied, both in itself and for the world it had been taken from.

But then, as leaves and blossoms started to crumble, as dead bodies were rotting and eaten by fungi (new blossoms, at least!), as the fresh green of the moss dried into brown and grey, as each walk past the old tree was a reminder that the strange mushroom you had broken from the bark was missing now

and no one could marvel at it anymore, because it had become yours. Not to mention the icicles – meanwhile a sad puddle of muddily water in your jar. Or the fantastic silver button you found on the floor – that was now desperately missing on your Granny’s jacket. Indeed, it was years before your first visit to a ‘real’ Wunderkammer that you already had learned a lot about the way things go whenever they are taken from their world and transferred to another one.

Nevertheless, also the bigger cabinets immediately triggered your curiosity, your fascination and your admiration; each of them a wonderful, wonderful world in its own rights, albeit crowded with dead things rather than with living ones, they seemed to be filled with spirits and energies. And all of them were standing still. So you could easily try to catch up, to connect, to communicate. And you could collect the shiny dust of their stories to take it with you. You were sure: the more dust you collected, the richer your knowledge would become. You always remained curious anyway. But due to that, you also learned more about the ways all those wonderful treasures from the wonderful, wonderful world had become part of the collections – and that, again, reminded you of your own one. From time to time, the shiny dust felt like tons of lead. Heavy and toxic, breath-taking and suffocating. No Wunderkammer, but a crypt.

This is not about nostalgia. Just as none of us ever steps in the same river twice, any attempt to time travel backwards will lead us to a different version of our past, and to one that is closer to our present and to our future(s) than to anything else. Only that we have to realize, the earlier the better: each decision comes with consequences always stretching into all dimensions: pasts, presents, and futures. None of these decisions is only about us.

Now, who is “us”? A desire for allies and alliances, to say the least. But of course before asking you to join the WILD WORLDING WUNDERKAMMER WORKSHOP I am dreaming about, I should share some more insight into my motivations to build it.

My background is in art theory and history, media studies and cultural studies; I am a professor for visual culture studies at an Institute for Art Education based at a German university; earlier I held positions as assistant professor and associate lecturer at universities and art academies in Germany and in other parts of Europe. Beyond academy I’ve been working as a writer and critic, and as a curator, developing projects with people from a whole variety of professions both in cooperation with cultural and/or communal institutions and in self-organized, community-based initiatives. If you ask me about my personal and professional passions in doing so, the development of interdisciplinary projects and programs at the intersections of theory and practice is much on top of my list – and my curiosity for exploring experimental formats and settings is probably never satisfied. Of course I am telling you this not only to introduce myself, but also to proceed towards our topic: As a student of art history raised in Western Europe, and with an academic family background, I almost literally grew up with and within the delusive stability of a canon – while at the same time critical art history and feminist art theory as well as contemporary art, or more precisely: artists working in this field were continuously widening the perspective.

However, albeit over decades contemporary art, critical theory, feminist art history and queer theory, visual culture studies, cultural studies and post-colonial theory were quite successful with problematizing the canon, pointing us to the blind spots and to toxic structures long established in the cultural field that is of course part of a whole system of social and political and economic entanglements, there is obviously still a lot to do. It is all but easy to change a running system. Not only because old habits die hard. There are also many turning points where we have to ask what to give up and what to keep with.

A prominent example in the garden of forking paths is the Wunderkammer known as museum: Introduced to us as a place for knowledge building, a collection of wonderful things that tell us stories about the world as well as about us, about nature and culture, history and technology, science and art, from the earliest times up to the present. At the same time, it's literally a hang-out for the canonized, an educational force for keeping with the canon. Moreover the majority of museums not only in the so called "Western world" are stuffed with items that found their way into the collections through mechanisms fuelled by the mentioned systems of power; some of these items are literally representing and/or even celebrating toxic structures, while others have been displaced and brought there, some have been bought, others have been stolen – and almost all of them (apart from those directly produced for the museum) have been extracted from their original contexts, from their social uses and/or from life.

For good reasons, over the past decades many critical voices have been raised; the more radical ones are demanding to empty the museums and/or to tear them down, others are coming up with claims for redefining the museum's missions and for rebuilding their structures. Dismantling, reassembling.

Would that work? Or will we have to keep with Audre Lorde, acknowledging that "[...] the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."

Let us find out.

Inspired by Ursula K. Le Guin's carrier bag theory of fiction – and its mother, Elizabeth Fischer's carrier bag theory of evolution – let us look for alternate ways to conceive and to do our work. We do this by worlding: by attuning to and melting into the subject(s) of our research. With/in theory and/as practice, with/in practice and/as theory, we are gathering and gaining situated knowledges, interwoven with multiple threads of imagination and desire.

But then gathering and gaining is based on collecting: data about objects, subjects, situations, relations; submitted into an order of things, shifted into storage, from time to time put on display: museums, libraries, servers. Imagination and desire are stripped off in this process and stored separately, if at all. Old habits die hard.

That's also why simply reviving the collection by the way of storytelling is not really a solution for this problem: It is relatively easy to re-introduce imagination and desire, because they always have been there, nested in the invisibility of niches and covered with the dust of time. But then it's the order of things so deeply embedded within the very structures that is limiting our options to renovate the building.

Thus for our worlding we will not only have to go wild, "wild" as in Halberstam's "Wild Things", and acknowledge our imaginations, our desires. We also need a different mind-set, a different set of methods, and a different set of tools. We have to re-organize the structures, the spaces as well as the ways we work together – we have to decide about what we have to abandon and what we can keep with.

So let us set up a new toolbox and a new workshop for our collaborative work, for our findings and our creations, for our research and our inspiration: a WILD WORLDING WUNDERKAMMER.

A Wunderkammer – seriously?

Seriously, as curiosity, and staying curious, is still our most precious gem – or more precisely: our philosopher's stone: the corner stone and foundation block of all knowledge building. And it is foundational indeed to name it.

For in doing so we acknowledge it is not about dead matter and stable structures, but about the vibrant matter of change; a catalyst that helps us to understand that everything is about change and about changing, in process. That's why we stay curious. And that's why not only all science still starts with curiosity – but also all worlding.

However, of course our Wunderkammer shall not be “the master's house”; the old cabinet of curiosities based on items taken away from others, other places, stolen from life – a deeply colonial concept, the greedy mother of the museum. We need a new structure for our wild-at-heart Wunderkammer; one that is our workshop and our toolbox rather than a storage. One that is probably closer to an assembly, a parliament, a party, a network, a collaboratory for all kinds of agencies and for agencies of all kinds. One that invites us to come together, to work together, to learn together and from each other – in and for a more-than-human, ever changing, vibrant, humming pluriverse.

Just as worlding, wunderkammering is a verb, an action, a process. It is our responsibility to no longer lean back and rely on a system that provides stability at a price that shall no longer be paid, neither by the living nor by the dead.

Perhaps this Wunderkammer does not even need walls, cabinets and boxes, nor a door to separate inside(rs) from outside(rs), included and captives from abandoned and excluded. We will see what we always knew or happily learned: that keeping something does not demand to own it. Care is substantial, and – as we want to take it seriously – it is a verb as well.

So let us muse together about a preliminary inventory of our WILD WORLDING WUNDERKAMMER WORKSHOP – and about the tools this tool(box) for alternative futures may provide.

If it were not itself such a prominent example for a forking-path-power-structure, I'd propose to follow the alphabet... please excuse me for doing so to make a start:

A is for AGATE Stones containing whole worlds, for ARTEMISIA'S bitter healing powers, for ANTS as teachers, for ALTERNATIVES, for ASSEMBLY, and for ACCESS.

B is for BORON from outer space, for the BACTERIA being us, for BELLADONNA'S deadly gifts, for BIOS, for BECOMING, and for BOUNDARIES we have to respect.

C is for CARBON, containing all the energies of lived lives, for CHRYSANTHEMAS carrying the sun, for CHAMAELEONS that synergize past and present, for COLLABORATORY, for CO-EXISTENCE and for COOPERATION...

D is for... Dare I ask you: Do you want to join? Can you imagine to participate in our WILD WORLDING WUNDERKAMMER WORKSHOP?

To give it a try, please take a breath and close your eyes. Imagine. Choose a letter from an alphabet of your choice. What would you like to contribute?

Always starting with your letter, choose a mineral, a metal, a stone, choose some lifeforms, perhaps a protozoon, a fungus, a plant, a fish, an insect, a mammal or a bird. And then of course bring some tools. This latter category – tools – is probably the most important one for our workshop, and it is also the widest one, open for experiments – if not demanding for them. Almost everything can become a tool: items of all kind, but also actions, strategies, formats, media, and even moods. It's the tools indeed that should help us to dismantle and to reassemble those concepts and constructions, ideas and imaginations of WUNDERKAMMER(ING) we strive to overcome.

But then similar can be said of those categories that seemed so stable over centuries: species, genus, families, orders, classes, phyla, kingdoms, domains; the so called 'reigns' of minerals, plants and animals.

Hierarchical orders of knowledge mirroring, mapping and matching human power structures, fantasies and phantasms of dominance and mastery of the world that separated what cannot be separated due to its deep entanglements, interrelationships and interdependencies.

Moreover, as we are living as cyborgs among cyborgs in cyborg ecosystems, in our (techno-)natureculture, as Donna J. Haraway and many others have rightly claimed, it is all about acknowledging kinship and forming new alliances between all kinds of existence and states of being. Therefore, when it comes to creating our Wunderkammer, we have good reasons to finally abandon the difference between “naturalia” and “artificialia” as well. At the same time, the planet urgently calls for fighting extractivism – the very extractivism that is still nurturing man-made technologies and tools. So here we have another good reason to redefine our relations to minerals, metals, stones, and to lifeforms of all kind. And another good reason to redefine our tools.

For dismantling “the master’s house” and for reassembling whatever kind of structure for our commons (why not a WILD WORLDING WUNDERKAMMER WORKSHOP?) we might still need both hammers and books. But we will also have to find, build, lend and invent other tools. And this is especially true for our WILD WORLDING WUNDERKAMMER WORKSHOP. Ah, a propos:

W is for WILD WORLDING WUNDERKAMMER WORKSHOP – and for you’re always WELCOME here. And please do not wait for the **Z** is for ZERO, as our work is never done.

2. References (excerpt)*

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- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

* **Please note:** The titles listed above in order of their appearance are obviously only those quoted or literally mentioned in my invitation to join the WILD WORLDING WUNDERKAMMER WORKSHOP. As a bibliomaniac, avid reader and imaginary librarian I am also much into creating oblong bibliographies and research related bookshelves. Those related to the WILD WORLDING WUNDERKAMMER WORKSHOP are currently encompassing not only books and essays on cabinets of curiosities and their history up to present times, but also on: collecting and collections, museums and critical museum studies, curiosity studies, the history of science and of knowledge, science fiction (including sf as primary literature and source), multispecies studies, post-colonial studies, design, methods and methodologies, and tools. For more information on the project and for exchange please feel free to contact me at: verena@kuni.org.

About the Author

Verena Kuni is a scholar in the field of art, cultural and media studies and professor for visual culture at Goethe University, Frankfurt Main. Her research and teaching, projects and publications focus on transfers between material and media cultures; media of imagination and technologies of transformation; DIY and critical making; biotopes, biotopias and techno/nature/cultures; toys and/as tools; creative entanglements between imagination and invention; visual epistemology; information design and/as (con)figuration(s) of knowledge; (in)visibilities; alternate realities and (trans)formations of time. Among her passions is the development of interdisciplinary projects and programs at the intersections of theory and practice; her curiosity for exploring experimental formats and settings is probably never satisfied. Find out more at www.kuniver.se.