

The Cabinet of Curiosities: Objects as Compositions

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On experiencing the multiple cabinets and gardens in the Jardin des Plantes in 1833, Ralph Waldo Emerson was struck by the affect the compositional structure had on him, noting in his journal: ‘How much finer things are in composition than alone. ‘Tis wise in man to make Cabinets’ (Brown 57). Emerson had already come to the conclusion that man only has to behold a star and immediately a process of ‘marriage’ between object and subject begins, but ‘[i]n Paris, Emerson found this “marriage” formalized in the systematic compositions of the [...] various cabinets’(58). According to Brown, Emerson’s act of reading what his eye encountered in the Jardin des Plantes – creating series, form, organization, relation – related to the kind of synthesis or composition of ideas he strove for in his writing (58). I am a member of GAITKRASH, a small performance company, and in this article I will discuss our developing performance piece, *The Cabinet of Curiosities*. *The Cabinet of Curiosities* uses, and indeed focuses on, objects in and as performance, and I will discuss a selection of objects which have featured in the cabinet in the context of the theories and artistic sources that have informed our work. I will consider these objects in the light of Emerson’s sense of objects as compositions emerging from the marriage between object and subject. Central to this inquiry is the idea of porosity – the porosity of the artists to one another’s ideas, which gave rise to the composition that is the piece, and the porosity of the spectator’s perceptual powers to the visual and aural elements, giving rise to composite objects.¹

¹ Due to the medium in which I am presenting these ideas, it will not be possible to adequately convey a sense of the aural elements of the piece: I am asking the reader to make a leap of faith in this regard.



Fig. 1. The Cabinet, dvd still, 4 March 2007. Photo: Claire Guerin.

The Cabinet of Curiosities was the first piece of work to be devised and performed by GAITKRASH. We are a small performance company, based in Cork in the South of Ireland, consisting of a sound artist, Mick O'Shea, and two actors (Regina Crowley and myself). The piece is designed to tour, but our preferred site is a small, dark narrow space with an audience capacity of about twenty.² The set is a wooden cabinet, 10ft tall and 5ft wide, mounted on a platform. It consists of 12 individual compartments, 6 on either side. Each compartment is equipped with an individual dimmer switch, controlled by the performers, and a pair of red velour curtains, creating the effect of 12 individual mini-stages. The cabinet is backless, and the two performers are concealed behind it. The sound artist sits, with his table of instruments, to one side of the performance space, and has a clear view of what is happening in the cabinet. Once the

² To date, the piece has been performed at the Granary Theatre, Platform Artists Series, Cork, 18-19 May 2006; Impact Theatre, Limerick, Excursions Performance Festival, 3 December 2006; Perforum Series, Granary Studio, Cork, March 2007.

audience is seated in front of the cabinet, an attendant cues the performers by opening the cabinet. The performance lasts between 25 and 35 minutes, the attendant closing the cabinet again when cued by the sound artist. Using their hands, the performers engage with and manipulate objects in dialogue with the sound artist. The objects performed in this manner include ‘found’ inanimate objects, animal organs, fruit and vegetables, pieces of text, toys, minerals, liquids, among others. The sound artist’s table of instruments is a collection of curiosities in its own right, including, for example, parts of musical instruments, battery-operated fans, mobile phones, wind-up toys, self-made instruments – all electronically amplified.



Fig. 2, Mick O'Shea, dvd still. Photo: Claire Guerin.

The initial impulse that gave rise to the project was the desire to find an artistic form that would reflect the conversations we had been having with each other on issues relating to the body. These could be broken down into three broad categories. First, we were interested in a sense of the sight and sound of the inner workings of the body. Like Michel Leiris, we are not interested in the body as ‘only gross matter and a despicable

magma of viscera,’ but as ‘a mysterious theatre which provides a stage for all exchange – whether of matter, mind, or the sense between inner and outer worlds’ (qtd in Ewing 386). Secondly, we wanted to question the idea of the skin as a boundary between outside and inside: the skin is commonly perceived as a container of a psychic space, but the body’s orifices complicate this sense of the skin forming a boundary between outside and inside. Where, for example, does the outside of the lip end and the inside begin, what about the nostril? We speak of the outer ear, the middle ear and the inner ear, but where exactly is the boundary line between outside and inside? The same question could be applied to the eyes, the eyelids, the genitals etc. Thirdly, we wanted to explore the desire to break things down into their component parts, in order to uncover their mysteries.

We decided to base our performance on the model of a conversation: Regina and I offer the sound artist visual impulses to engage with and Mick offers us auditory impulses in response to what he sees. This results in compositions made up of aural and visual stimuli. These are offered to our audience to respond to in whatever way they choose: we offer no narratives, and although partly working with individual scores, the spectator is not aware of these. It was clear from the outset that improvisation had to be inherent in the performance. Coming from a more traditional, theatre-based approach to performance, whereby the ensemble works towards and contracts into a finished product, Regina and I were intrigued to be challenged by the sound artist, who found the idea of a fixed *mise en scène* an alien and uninteresting way of working. For Mick, it was essential that something ‘new’ should be happening in the moment of performance, so the three of us always prepared to lay ourselves open to surprises.

In the early stages of seeking a form for the visual representation, we played with the idea of the operating theatre and the anatomy table. We wanted organs to feature in the performance, invoking their Graeco-Roman mythological and symbolic connotations: the liver as the seat of love, the kidneys as the seat of the affections and so on.³ We thought of using intestines as skipping ropes, playing ball with hearts and kidneys, ideas that were impractical, but residues of which remained and fed into later forms. We thought about the sounds that functioning innards make, and again we were back to the common perception of the body, specifically the trunk as a hollow container with the organs and innards fixed in the right places. How would we do justice to the fascinating mechanisms of the body in keeping with Michel Leiris' sense of the body as 'a mysterious theatre'?

The idea of having objects perform as a mode of representation came as we started to explore the performing of body parts in isolation, creating a kind of puppet theatre with hands, feet, the back of an upper arm, or certain sections of the face.⁴ We began to move in and out of spaces carrying animal organs and body parts on shiny metal plates – heart, liver, kidney, a pig's ear, a cow's tongue – and displaying them on surfaces such as wooden benches. Then we began to add other objects that suggested themselves to form compositions, such as a large butcher's knife, a little articulated wooden man plucked from one of our gardens. This early experiment fed into the ultimate form we chose of moving objects in and out of the mini-theatres that made up the cabinet.

³ References to the mythological status of organs frequently feature in the plays of Shakespeare; see, for example, *Merry Wives of Windsor* where Pistol speaks of Falstaff as loving Ford's wife '[w]ith liver burning hot' (2.2.112). Freud has written extensively on mythology and the organs of the body. See also Joseph Campbell's work on mythology and his theory that the genesis of mythology is 'in the energies of the organs of the body in conflict with each other' in *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) 39.

⁴ We found that the full face was so linked to an identifiable subject that it didn't seem to read well as an object; it didn't disconnect so readily from the rest of the body as, say, a foot, a hand or the back of the upper arm in isolation.

As we began to pursue the idea of displaying individual objects for contemplation, transforming them into curious objects, it made more sense to take our performers' bodies in their entirety out of the picture. The idea of displaying curious objects took us to the concept of cabinets of curiosity or, in German, '*Wunderkammern*'. We liked the fact that the German word for cabinet of curiosity - '*Wunderkammer*' - takes us beyond mere curiosity, connoting the idea of wonder in the noun *Wunder*, surprise in the verb *sich wundern*, and strange or odd in the adjective *wunderlich*. What also appealed to us was the term '*Kunstkammer*,' used in the early Renaissance period, with its connotations of microcosm or theatre of the world and memory theatre (Fiorani 268). Most of the things that feature as objects or components of objects in the cabinet are not in themselves curious. In their quotidian context, they exist only to serve some banal function or be consumed, or as Pearson and Thomas say, 'they exist for us in a state of inconspicuous familiarity' (Pearson 157), only drawing attention to themselves when they break, go missing or become unsuitable for consumption, in the case of animal parts. But by being framed in a compartment of our cabinet – almost a miniature 'proscenium arch' – they acquire a 'watchability,' demanding to be looked at and contemplated.

Having decided to create a cabinet of curiosities we began to collect objects that might lend themselves to being performed in the cabinet and that were somehow linked to our areas of interest. Some we actively looked for, as when shopping in the market for fruit and vegetables: cabbages, peppers, aubergines, organs and innards. We searched among objects we already had in our possession, in boxes of odds and ends from our attics. And some items we simply stumbled upon at various sites, such as the beach, reflecting Kantor's idea of a found object being locatable somewhere between the

garbage and infinity (*The Theatre of Tadeusz Kantor*). However, we always worked with a sense of encounter or recognition: what seemed to be actively presenting itself to us or announcing its presence? For example, I came upon an old discolored rubber glove on a beach one day and wondered how an abandoned, useless rubber glove with holes in it, likely to be washed out to sea, might acquire a whole new significance when transformed into a curious object, perhaps placed on a shiny plate, lit with a certain intensity of light and bathed in the soundscape it inspired in the sound artist. Furthermore, in this new composition it might trigger a myriad of different associations in the imagination of an audience member regarding it, from films watched, novels read, and so on. It could become, for instance, the hand of the monster created by Victor Frankenstein. What an honour, we might say, for a lowly, disused rubber glove to have such an identity conferred upon it!

In this process of ‘trying things out,’ we became aware of the journeys that things took from the moment we chose them, and lifted them from their quotidian context, to their being performed in the cabinet. We began to develop a sense of the criteria by which we chose them – what was the object’s scope for readability? – and of different ways of looking. For instance, when we purchased innards and organs in the market we became aware that our way of looking, and the vocabulary we were using to establish what we would accept and reject as items for purchase, was totally at odds with the perception of the person behind the counter doing the selling. As we discussed the visual impact of samples of liver, kidneys, hearts, and how we thought they would read in the cabinet, asking to view the pieces from various angles, we would suddenly realize that we were

trying the patience of the salesperson. At the tripe and drisheen⁵ counter in Cork's renowned English Market, I once found myself almost having to tussle with the lady behind the counter to sell me the quantities and shapes I thought would work in the cabinet, as she went to slice off chunks, telling me in good natured tones that I'd never be able to eat such large quantities. The journey the tripe and the drisheen made from sitting anonymously with larger quantities in stainless steel bowls at the market to being performed in our cabinet was a journey of transformation, a process of individuation, of acquiring objectness. The same could be said for any of the other ordinary objects, the cabbages, peppers, passion fruits etc that have made their way into the cabinet. A pig's kidney is no longer simply a piece of meat lying in a stainless steel bowl, indistinguishable from the dozens of other kidneys surrounding it that will find their way into a plastic bag and then on to the pan, and so on; by being displayed,⁶ by 'performing' in a microcosmic theatre it draws attention to itself. As Terry Eagleton would say of the words chosen to craft a poem, 'there is a disproportion between the signifier [...] and the signified [...]' (2). Moreover, in juxtaposition with the other objects in the cabinet it might signify many different things in the minds of individual spectators.

⁵ Dried sheep's blood in a kind of sausage form.

⁶ We used antique silver display units – often with a reveal element such as a sliding cover – to frame the organs as precious objects.



Fig. 3, pig's kidney performed in the cabinet, video still. Declan O' Meara.

The decision to use animal organs in the cabinet, such as the pig's kidney seen in the image above, was informed by our idea of rupturing the sense of boundary between inside and outside and the desire to contemplate the mysterious theatre of the inner forces of the body that usually remain invisible to the naked eye. This impulse was informed, for example, by the paintings of Francis Bacon, which visually represent the disruption of the idea of the skin as a barrier between inside and outside or of the body having discrete boundaries. As Giles Deleuze argues, 'what fascinates Bacon is not movement, but its effect on an immobile body: heads whipped by the wind or deformed by an aspiration, but also the interior forces that climb through the flesh' (xii). When we considered the ethics of 'using' the organs and body parts of defenceless - albeit dead - animals for our art, we assuaged our conscience with the knowledge that we were rescuing them from a moribund fate as meat for purchase and consumption, giving them a brief 'career' as *dramatis personae* in the theatre. To date, no audience member has objected to or expressed offence at our use of animal organs. Responses usually come in the form of visceral reactions, such as 'I felt like my liver was being stroked.'



Fig. 4, cabbage, video still. Declan O' Meara.

When fruit and vegetables feature in the cabinet they are often ripped apart, cut or squashed. We chose to ‘dissect’ the fruit and vegetables rather than the organs, as that would have referenced their moribund existence as meat. Interestingly, spectators frequently found the performance of the fruit and vegetables more disturbing as compared with that of the organs. These dismemberings tie in with our impulse to link our own curiosity to what seems to be man’s insatiable need to take things apart to find out how they work, the endless quest to get inside things and reduce them to their component parts in order to get to the bottom of their mysteries. An influence in this instance was Tim Marshall’s *Murdering to Dissect* which thematises how easily this drive can degenerate into destructiveness and criminal activity.⁷ Marshall’s study on grave-robbing takes its title from Wordsworth’s 1798 poem ‘The Tables Turned’:

⁷ For example, Marshall outlines the case of the 19th century Edinburgh anatomist, Dr Robert Knox, who obtained fresh corpses by paying the infamous Irishmen William Burke and William Hare, who smothered their victims in a manner that left no signs of violence on the body.

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things;
We murder to dissect. (qtd in Marshall 1)

This extract from Wordsworth's poem has also featured as an 'object' in our cabinet.⁸



Fig. 5. arms in isolation, video still.

Regina and I used our hands to animate and manipulate the objects in the cabinet. Our hands therefore became an intrinsic part of the performance, forming compositions with the objects. But they also featured as performed objects in isolation, as did our feet, and parts of our arms, legs and faces. This performance choice was informed by the photographs of Francesca Woodman. These give expression to the fragility of psycho-

⁸ In the earlier performances Regina and I used radio-microphones during the performance to add text fragments to the soundscape at intervals chosen in the moment of performance. Further text fragments we used were taken, for example, from 'The Applicant' and 'Cut' by Sylvia Plath, 'Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost' by Angela Carter, 'Salt' by Pablo Neruda and 'The Nose' by Christian Morgenstern. For the later performances we decided to take our live voices out of the performance to avoid an association in the spectator's mind between us as performers and our body parts as 'objects' in performance.

corporeal boundaries, as the body of the artist – at once subject and object of her images – merges with and fades into disintegrating surfaces such as the cracked, crumbling walls of derelict houses and tombstones, behind strips of loose wallpaper; isolated limbs emerge from holes in porous walls. Other sources of inspiration for our use of our bodies included the photographs *Nude, Chairs, Arms and Legs* by Edward Weston or *Peek a Boo Fingers* by Ernestine Ruben, which present abstracted body parts in relation to the field and the frame of the image (Ewing 39; 41). Framing and performing abstracted body parts allows them to become synecdochic, acquiring properties of the whole, such as a personality, the ability to think and perceive, which resonates with Richard Schechner's argument that, 'the body is an organism of endless adaptability. A knee can think, a finger can laugh, a belly cry, a brain walk and a buttock listen' (132). Limbs or a mouth perceived thus, in abstraction, give the spectator the freedom to contemplate and imaginatively engage with the idea of a hand or a foot without having to negotiate the owner. This ensures that the spectator's focus is consistently on the contents of the cabinet and not on the performers concealed behind it.

As manipulators of the objects from behind the cabinet, we see nothing of what the audience sees and, with each successive performance, I have noticed that I work increasingly with a sense of looking and listening with my hands. I often close my eyes to help me to hear the soundscape created by the sound artist, and respond better with my hands. Because of the improvisatorial and abstract nature of the piece, it is always fascinating to hear how spectators respond to the objects, what journeys the objects take them on, what connections they make between objects in the cabinet in any given moment. The responses are rendered all the more diverse by virtue of the fact that, unlike

the traditional static cabinet of curiosity, this is a live, kinaesthetic cabinet. It is made up of composite elements that are constantly shifting under the spectators' gazes and the performers' manipulations. Even if the material objects remain still for a time, the soundscape that forms part of the composition is also constantly shifting. Sometimes we adjust the degree of light illuminating an object with the individual dimmer switches and again, the composite object becomes something slightly different.

The philosopher Michael Moreau argues that, 'the world seems to be full of objects that lack sharp boundaries and in this sense really are vague' (334).⁹ He invites the reader to take any ordinary material object: on close inspection she will find that something is always tearing away or coming loose, microscopic particles are always wearing off at the edges or evaporating away. He takes the example of 'Tibbles the cat' whose loose whisker will ultimately drop off for good. This loose whisker is characterized as a 'questionable' part of Tibbles (334). Parts that detach combine with something else to form something new. Almost every object we can apprehend, therefore, is in a constant state of flux: as Morreau writes, 'composition is completely unrestricted' (337). It could be argued that *The Cabinet of Curiosities* is a theatricalised version of Moreau's ideas, in that it draws attention to, or formalizes, and performs this permanent state of flux that objects find themselves in. The shifting assemblages performed on the twelve mini-stages that are interpenetrated by the sound elements, and that in the course of the 30-minute performance form a kind of palimpsest, draw the spectator into an activity of 'completely unrestricted' composition. This brings us back to Emerson's idea of a process of marriage between object and subject.

⁵ Objects here can mean anything from organisms, cities, abstract entities to ordinary material objects and the objects are described as vague because their functional parts get lost *gradually*.

The Cabinet of Curiosities continues as a work-in-progress for GAITKRASH. To date, we have performed the piece just six times and with each successive performance we have learned to trust how our impulses respond in the moment, as well as the piece's capacity to engage our audiences. Spectators have commented that attending our performance is like having 'dream time,' allowing memory shards to float to the surface and connect with the objects in the cabinet in whatever way suggests itself. In this sense we could describe the piece as post-dramatic, since it relates to the spectator's sense of the world but presents no 'surveyable whole' (Lehmann 11). The spectator creates the piece out of her personal aggregation of narratives in combination with the visual and aural impulses offered in performance. The cabinet, although in itself a bounded entity or container, is full of gaps and holes, unmarked spaces, and this circumstance allows the piece to resonate with the spectator's inner landscape. According to Julie Salverson, it is these gaps in a non-literalistic representational form 'that hold [...] the circle of knowing open,' that create space 'across which the familiar and the strange can gaze upon each other' (3).

In further phases of the work we plan to invite audience members to place things in a box before the performance that we will use as objects in the cabinet. We would like to gather stories in post-performance discussions about the new lives these things acquired in the minds of spectators as a result of 'objectifying them as foci of thought' (Pearson 159) and contemplation in performance. We also plan to travel with the piece, making it specific to the places it is performed in by filling the cabinet with objects we find locally, in markets, dustbins, skips, wherever an object beckons to us. As the project has evolved, the diversity of spectators' feedback on which objects have signified for

them personally has taught us that the lighter our touch and the more playful our approach to working the objects in the performance the more we set them free as objects of engagement for the watcher. We are learning to work with a sense that '[t]he material world around us is inherently to-be-interpreted' (Pearson 155) because, in Emerson's words, there is 'a radical correspondence between visible things and human thought' (Brown, 60).

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