



Curiouser: New Encounters with the Victorian Natural History Collection . 2011

An exhibit curated by Erik Carlson + Erica Carpenter

at the Museum of Natural History, Roger Williams Park, Providence, RI • Fall 2010

The Museum is part of the [City of Providence](#) Parks and Recreation Department. Angel Taveras, Mayor.

EXHIBIT PROSPECTUS

‘Curiouser and curiouser!’ cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English).

Alice’s exclamation at the beginning of *Alice in Wonderland* can be read as a distillation of the Victorian perspective on the natural world. As science, industry, and travel expanded, Western culture entered a new era, one in which the old frontiers of the world seemed to be rolling continually backward, revealing a fantastic array of insects, birds, fungi, sea-life, fossils, and other marvels retrieved from far-flung lands. And the era’s enthusiasm for this wide new world and its wonders was in no way restricted to academia. Everyday people got in on the natural history movement, becoming avid collectors and transcribers of the life they found in their own communities, and expanding their collections by trading specimens through the mail. Specimens, in fact – specimens of birds, mammals, exotic plants and shells – became the order of the day, finding their way into parlors as decorative showpieces and patterned into wallpapers and textiles. For people of all kinds, natural history was a full-fledged obsession. It was pop culture.

Today it may be hard to fathom a cultural obsession on the order of, say, our own preoccupation with the lives of celebrities, that revolved around something so cerebral as the project of cataloguing nature. But that’s what’s so fascinating about the Victorian collectors. Like Alice, whose bewilderment in the midst of Wonderland causes her to forget her good English, Victorians pursued their nature studies with a passion ruled as much by pure exuberance as by intellect. This is evidenced in the fact that many of the Museum’s donated collections are just that: collections. There are jars and drawers and boxes full of specimens that remain as they were on the day they were gathered, with no more scientific explanation than a minutely inscribed species name and the locale where the specimen was found. It seems the collector was too thrilled by the prospect of running out and finding more specimens to sit down and determine exactly what it was that he or she already had. A visitor to the Museum’s vaults gets the sense that these collectors were moved most of all by the beauty and strangeness of what they saw. And as Walter Benjamin said, ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects.

Obsession, exuberance, desire, and sheer, unchecked curiosity. The same emotional drives that gave the natural history movement such vitality in its own day later came to make it seem strange, even creepy, to modern tastes: all those stuffed birds, all those dusty vials, all those glass eyes. But the fact remains that without the strange curiosity of the Victorian collectors, and of those who followed a generation after them, we would be left today with no material trace of some life-forms that are now extinct, such as the taxidermy passenger pigeon that resides in the Museum’s Natural Selections room. And as we conclude the first decade of the 21st century, in a world where global warming threatens mass species die-offs on a magnitude not seen since the Ice Age, these antique cabinets of wonders begin to acquire an urgency that seems to beg their re-entry into contemporary dialogue.

(continued)



Museum of Natural History & Planetarium

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PROSPECTUS

This is where *Curiouser* begins – with what we hope will be the vivid, wild, colorful return of Victorian science specimens to the realms of relevance and light. Our hope is to bring together artists who, by resurrecting the Museum’s collections from the vaults, can find in them voices that speak to a much different world than the one from which they were taken. We hope overall for an immersive experience, one that not only engages the ‘history of natural history’—and the Museum’s own roots in the Victorians’ passion for nature-collecting—but that also seeks out correlations to our complex relationship with nature today. The collections, we hope, will provide a unique lens for looking forward as well as back.

This project will allow the Museum to overcome a challenge it has faced for some time: how to make its vast collections available to the public, not just as arcane specimens, but as vivid evidence of a time when people indeed appear to have been a good deal *curiouser* than we are today. We hope to reveal the Victorian collector’s imagination with all of its strange passions intact, drawing the visitor into a world that does in fact become *curiouser* and *curiouser* as the artworks spin expanding webs of connection and inference between items that may not have carried any relation at all before the collector plucked them up. Since traditional scientific displays cannot communicate the wild diversity to be found in the Museum’s vaults, *Curiouser* will provide a solution by freeing the collections from the strict imperatives of science and analysis, releasing them down the rabbit-hole of artistic production.

Like Alice, we too need to set aside our usual ways of looking at the world and turn things upon their head. This experience is the nature of artistic encounter: to become so excited that we enter a state in which sense becomes plastic, order becomes malleable, and the world is remade as a Wonderland like Carrol’s, where odd juxtapositions provide a lens for understanding the rules and workings of the waking world.

-- Erica Carpenter, March 2009

Curiouser is supported by the
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Providence’s Museum of Natural History.





CURATOR BIOS:

Erik J. Carlson: *Lead Curator.* Erik Carlson is an RI-based media artist + composer and has 16 years of experience planning and executing public art, music + design events. He has a particular interest in bridging between fields and mediums, collaborating with architects, writers, film makers and photographers on previous multimedia projects and exhibits. Erik is currently completing a permanent public art installation for the Denver Public Library, titled **Cloud Seeding**, and a commission by the **NASA RI Space Grant Consortium** based on the geological formation of the moon. He has received awards from the **American Institute of Architects** for the **Low Rez / Hi Fi** public art installation in Washington DC (with HY Architecture, also shown in the **Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum**) and in 2009, was awarded the **MacColl-Johnson Fellowship** in music composition. In 2007 he conceived of and curated the **alt-Space** series at the Museum of Natural History's Cormack Planetarium, creating 6 collaborative multimedia performances. Erik has composed + produced 5 internationally-released CDs of experimental music under the name **AREA C** and holds a BA in English Literature from the University of Virginia.

Erica Carpenter: *Co-Curator + Lead Writer.* After earning a B.A. from Vassar College, Erica Carpenter went on to Brown University's Graduate Program in Literary Arts/Poetry, where her work was recognized with awards and fellowships including the University's Peter Kaplan Fellowship, a Beinecke Fellowship, and a Westin Prize for Poetry. She earned her M.F.A. in 1998. In 2000, **Etherdome** published her first chapbook, *Summoned to the Fences*, and in 2006 her first full-length collection of poems, *Perspective Would Have Us*, was brought out by **Burning Deck Press**. She has also published poems in journals including *Lingo*, *26*, *Sal Mimeo*, and *No: A Journal of the Arts*.

Collaborations: Erica Carpenter and Erik Carlson have collaborated on numerous projects. In 2000, they created **BASE**, a project that began as a documentary work for the Quonset / Davisville Naval Base, but developed into a photo and text-based art piece that approached the entire abandoned property as a found object. Over the years, continuing collaborations have included: **Haunts** (Creative Capital finalist, 2008) an installation piece for the "pre-abandoned" neighborhoods created by America's speculative housing bubble; **Found Ground** (funded by RI State Council on the Arts, 2008), which used rough walls exposed up by demolition in downtown Providence as screens for text/image projections (also with Erik Gould); and **You Are Spinning**, an interactive public art installation that proposes combining a Foucault's Pendulum with time-lapsed panoramic video captures to locate the viewer on the surface of the spinning earth (finalist, Colorado State Council on the Arts / Univ. of Colorado at Colorado Springs, 2009).