

Completeness: How the Lack of a Mouse in a Box Revisits the Spectacle of the *Kunstkammer*

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Set aside your expectations that this will be your typical museum visit – instead, prepare for a disruptive and engaging experience (Figure 1). ‘*Spitzmaus Mummy in a Coffin and Other Treasures*’ at the Kunsthistorisches Museum (KHM) in Vienna and curated by Wes Anderson and Juman Malouf together with Jasper Sharp and Mario Mainetti is an exhibition that leaves visitors either perplexed or enchanted.

The exhibition is the third installment in a series of artist-curated exhibitions initiated by Jasper Sharp of the KHM in 2012. This museological project was inspired by the provocative and unexpected selection of objects that Andy Warhol made from the collections of the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, which travelled to three different museums in 1969–1970. The questions guiding the artist-curated exhibitions at the KHM have followed the same template: How would an artist-curated exhibition be different from a museum-curated exhibition? What happens if objects are selected based on intuitive criteria rather than established museological categories?

The result, in the case of *Spitzmaus...*, is a wordless exhibition, which is neither chronologically nor narratively driven and has no linear story, nor a clear-cut digested message with an educational mission. Instead, one is confronted with an intuitive chaos and a visual spectacle. In 2015, filmmaker Wes Anderson and illustrator

and author Juman Malouf were invited to explore the more than four million objects held in the collections of the KHM. The final exhibition holds a selection of 423 objects, spanning 5000 years and the globe. More than 350 of these objects were taken from the storages of the KHM and many of them had never been exhibited before. In fact, four emu eggs were laid especially for the exhibition in 2018. The objects are organized in a smallish single gallery with eight different rooms, each of which has its own distinct organizing principle as well as mood. Despite this large number of objects on display, the way they are placed manages to give each object weight and encourages visitors to inspect them individually (Figure 2). For those who know Anderson and Malouf’s works, it will become immediately apparent that the exhibition is steeped in their artistic styles.

The two opposite ends of the gallery are framed by rooms dedicated to portraits. The first plays with theme of spectacle and looking, including the well-known sixteenth-century German portraits of a family with Hirsutism standing opposite colorful courtly banquet scenes. The other contains portraits of people whose appearance, in one way or another, can be said to be unique. Here, Anderson and Malouf are interested in character made visible in physique. Between these two areas with portraits are six rooms, each with their own category of

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Figure 1. Exhibition View: Overview. Photo: © KHM-Museumsverband.

objects, namely: green objects, portraits of children dressed as adults, miniatures, animals, wooden objects, and lastly, boxes and cases. For example, the green room is designed around a spectacular emerald vessel, which is surrounded by an eclectic mix of objects in a similar color palette, ranging from taxidermy birds and ethnographic musical instruments to antique statuettes and modern theatre costumes. The wooden room not only contains all manner of wooden objects encased behind glass panes but is paneled entirely in wood. As such, it carries the smell of wood, strengthening the theme of the room and its sensory effect. The room of animals, or the ‘zoo,’ contains the title object of the exhibition. Taken from a packed, rarely-viewed vitrine in one of the KHM’s Ancient Egypt galleries, the small wooden coffin, which used to contain a mummified shrew

encapsulates the spirit of the exhibition by placing the marginalized center-stage (Figure 3). Anderson and Malouf’s aim of shining a light on previously unseen or unnoticed objects is clearly illustrated in the room of boxes and cases. Turning the tables, it is the strangely shaped receptacles or traveling cases of objects that are placed on display, while the objects themselves are either absent, invisible, or shadowed by their encasings.

Besides the introductory panel text outside the actual exhibition gallery, *Spitzmaus*. . . contains no further labels or written text. Instead, visitors can use a booklet, which contains the label texts of all the objects, numbered continuously and separated by room. These label texts reveal only the most basic information about the object (title, place and/or author, date, material, collection or museum, inventory number),



Figure 2. Exhibition View: Miniatures Room. Photo: © KHM-Museumsverband.



Figure 3. Exhibition View: *Coffin of a Spitzmaus (Shrew)*. Photo: ©KHM-Museumsverband.



Figure 4. Exhibition View: Vitrine from the Original Furnishings of the Collection "Kunst industrieller Gegenstände" (today *Kunstkammer*). Photo: Csilla Ariese.

encouraging visitors to engage with the objects aesthetically rather than contextually or narratively. The visual impact of the exhibition extends outwards from the gallery itself: Malouf's object illustrations can be found throughout the KHM in the places from where those objects have been temporarily removed. For those looking for a verbal element, the non-complimentary, optional audio tour provides a deeper insight into the decisions behind some of the object selections and ordering principles, as well as the curatorial processes of Anderson, Malouf, and Sharp.

...it was all about the sound and shape of the word [spitzmaus], which actually is exactly how

he's curated the whole exhibition: the sound and look and smell and shape of the thing rather than the individual significances. It's about a completeness of experience rather than the individual parts (audio tour, fragment #1421).

Significantly, the first item in the exhibition is a painting of a *kunstkammer*, namely 'Cabinet of Curiosities' by Frans II Francken (c.1620/25). The exhibition as a whole is a playful revisiting of the spectacle of the *kunstkammer*. Its method of conception, namely the intuitive selection of objects based on simply 'liking them,' rather than their context, maker, or story, is strongly reminiscent of the selections, categorizations, and ordering



Figure 5. Exhibition View: Green Room detail, objects 17-67. Photo: Csilla Ariese.

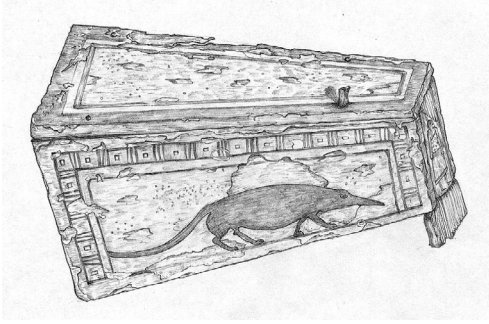


Figure 6. Coffin of a Spitzmaus. Drawing: ©Juman Malouf.

principles in cabinets of curiosities. Although perhaps appearing ‘eclectic’ to the modern museum visitor, neither the historical *kunstskammern* nor this exhibition are randomly structured. However, the guiding principles underlying their structuring diverge from those we have come to accept as normalized within museum settings. Notably during the development of the exhibition, the contrasts between Anderson and Malouf’s object groupings and the museum staff’s curatorial habits became apparent. The resulting exhibition not only disrupts visitors’ expectations of displays and categories but challenged curators to step outside the boundaries of their everyday practices to consider their own collections according to other types of associations and qualifications. Similarly to the *kunstskammer*, the resulting exhibition provides a totality of experience in which each object – or even the purposeful lack of an object – has a role to play. Absences serve to emphasize the chosen objects, in turn highlighting the deliberateness of the curatorial process and strengthening the experiential impact of each room. Poetically, while the exhibition begins with a painting of a cabinet of curiosities, it ends with an empty vitrine from the KHM’s *kunstskammer* placed on display as an object in itself (Figure 4). Thus, the exhibition comes full circle in the spectacle of

curiosities and also turns its gaze inwards onto the museum institution.

Not surprisingly for an exhibition by a filmmaker and an illustrator, *Spitzmaus*. . . is a cinematographic feast for the eyes, in which the aesthetic qualities of the objects are emphasized through their layout within the rooms. Objects are not simply placed at an optimal viewing height, but rather deliberately placed low and high (sometimes at floor level, sometimes above doorways) with the clear intent for connections and juxtapositions. This is most beautifully staged in the green room, where paintings in various shades of green are reflected in the glass vitrine holding the green objects (Figure 5). Yet, it is up to the viewer to envision their own connections and relationships between objects, ideally inspiring individual quests for knowledge.

The lack of instruction to the visitors on how to ‘read’ the exhibition creates interesting visitor dynamics and differing responses. We observed some visitors sitting or kneeling on the ground, inspecting the objects with guidance from the booklet. Others were listening to the audio tour in solitude or discussing items and relationships between objects or of entire rooms together. Although all the objects are encased behind glass, visitors tended to get intimately close to the objects, pressing up against the glass to view things closely or touching the glass to point out details. There was no oppressive silence in the gallery as visitors audibly shared their affective reactions to the exhibition with each other. Ultimately, there is no consensus about the exhibition. For some visitors, the lack of narrative or chronology is insurmountable. Without a guiding perspective with which to navigate the exhibition, these visitors felt lost and did not find meaning in this ‘quirky’ collection of curiosities. Particularly for these visitors, the audio tour could have provided useful explanations and examples of links between

objects. On the other hand, other visitors especially appreciated the quirkiness of the exhibition and found that it provided a refreshingly different museum experience.

These diverging reactions to the exhibition stem from the fact that Anderson and Malouf have succeeded in creating spaces which evoke visceral responses. The individual rooms that they have so deliberately and exquisitely designed do not only have an aesthetic impact but create palpable moods. The rooms need to be experienced in their completeness. Therefore, the catalogue and photographs of the exhibition can only partly do justice to the affective experience of *Spitzmaus*. . . (Figure 6).

Although relatively rare outside of contemporary art museums, artist-curated exhibitions are not new in the museum world. Similarly, such an intuitive selection and placement of objects can be traced back to the deep historical roots of the museum institution in the early modern cabinets of curiosities. Nonetheless, the overall result of this particular exhibition can still be considered unique in its own terms. In the exhibition catalogue, Anderson states that he wants this show to impact and advance the methods of art history through trial and error. While this may be a far-fetched purpose, as their curatorial methods are not entirely innovative, the exhibition does succeed in creating a playful, self-reflective revisiting of the spectacle of the *kunstkammer*. It remains to be seen whether the field of museology and curatorial practices will be influenced by Anderson and Malouf's work. Will there be an afterlife for the Spitzmaus mummy's coffin?

END

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