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William Gibson's Debt to the Culture of Curiosity: The Wunderkammer, or, Who Controls the World?

Abstract: The article discusses transformations in William Gibson's employment of the theme and poetics of the Wunderkammer from his two early novels, *Neuromancer* (1984) and *Count Zero* (1987), to *Zero History* (2010), his last-but-one novel. The exploration of Gibson's representations of various Wunderkammer collections and arrangements in these books reveals his ever more pronounced recourse, over time, to the culture of curiosity as a diagnostic instrument. By interrogating the changing function of the Wunderkammer in Gibson's oeuvre, along with all its early-modern and contemporary associations with curiosity, it is possible to tease out the complexity of the writer's evolving view of the duality, and the fusion, of the digital and the material, as well as his keen understanding of how the late capitalist market functions. Through his diagnostic representations of various cabinets of curiosities, Gibson reverses tendencies governing the transformations of the Wunderkammer as a collection of curia from the 16th to the 18th century, as well as overturning the relationship between the collection as a representation of available knowledge and the desire to create synthetic life. Gibson's novels, which represent postdigital reality by analogous means, can thus be designated as postdigital analog writings that, according to Michael Punt, give expression to contemporary consciousness formed "in the Wunderkammer."

Keywords: Wunderkammer, curiosity, Joseph Cornell, synthetic life, artificial intelligence, late capitalist market, postdigital analog writing

How do humans experience computers and networks? We need to recast this. … I suggest that we ask instead, How do networks 'experience'? What operations do networks perform and undergo to change and produce new forms of experience? By inverting the relations between networks, experience, and human being, I am proposing that we also rethink what we mean by "experience" in contemporary culture.

Anne Munster, *An Aesthesia of Networks*

Toward the end of the Middle Ages, in the countries of continental Europe, princes and learned men used to collect the most disparate objects in a Wunderkammer (cabinet of wonder), which contained, promiscuously, rocks of an unusual shape, coins, stuffed animals, manuscript volumes, ostrich eggs, and unicorn horns. Statues and paintings stood side by side with curios and exemplars of natural history in these cabinets of wonders when people started collecting art objects….

Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*

> …the century I found myself in as the 20th century ended seemed to me to be stranger and more complex than almost anything science fiction had offered.
>
> William Gibson, *High Profiles*, Interview

Discussions of Gibson's interest in the collages assembled by Joseph Cornell—due to their form, reminiscent of old showcases, referred to as Cornell boxes—and analyses of their ekphrastic representations in Gibson's second novel have become a critical commonplace (Fabijancic 233-242, Hoepker 95-114), and are well documented. Tony Fabijancic begins his examination of the Cornell box forgeries in *Count Zero* (1987) by observing that many of Cornell's original assemblages "convey not so much the past as a documentable (material) object, but rather a dreamy appreciation for 'pastness' as a sign" (234). Fabijancic compares Cornell to Walter Benjamin's ragpicker historian (236-237) and observes that "Cornell, like Benjamin, seems to have conceived of the past as a fluid, intuitively grasped inter-communication between artefacts, a system of signs refusing a final, fixed form" (237). Even as Fabijancic points to fluid relationships between the fragments employed by Cornell and the semioticization of the collage boxes created by the artist, the critic does not see a connection between Cornell boxes and the Wunderkammer, whose characteristics include collage-like arrangements of objects and pansemioticism, that is, a conviction that "natural phenomena do not lead an isolated existence but are connected with one another in a complex web of significations" (Westerhoff 641).

Conversely, Karin Hoepker proposes that Gibson's ekphrastic descriptions of Cornell forgeries showcase the writer's "architectonics of meaning" that arises from his employment of "Wunderkammer poetics" (106-109) at large. Even as Hoepker recognizes that Cornell was using in his boxes rejects and junk, and that, by drawing on Cornell's art, Gibson also produces verbal representations of junk-art collections, she does not explore the role Gibson has ascribed to the Wunderkammer arrangements since as early as the *Neuromancer* (1984), but concentrates on the Wunderkammer poetics of space solely in *Count Zero*.

However, Gibson has employed the theme of the Wunderkammer throughout his entire career. Representations of the Wunderkammer in *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*, novels that belong to the *Sprawl* trilogy, which opened Gibson's career as a cyberpunk writer, help bring out the complexities of his view of artificial intelligence. In his last-but-one novel, *Zero History* (2010), part of the *Blue Ant* trilogy, the theme of the Wunderkammer virtually sets the tone for the entire plot. The first chapter of the novel is entitled "Cabinet"—after the name of the club in which the protagonist Hollis Henry is staying. In the taxi to the hotel, Hollis immediately makes the association with the cabinet of curiosities, its aura of esoteric knowledge and powers that control that knowledge: "Cabinet, so called; of Curiosities, unspoken" (*Zero* 2).

In light of the fact that it is the effect of wonder that the cabinet of curiosities is expected to elicit, and because the relationships of juxtaposition, proximity, sympathy, similarity, correspondence and collocation govern the arrangement of items in the Wunderkammer, the writer's continuous postmodernist and cyberpunk fascination with waste, refuse and junk clearly provides grounds for extending the application of what Hoepker construes as Gibson's Wunderkammer poetics to the writer's whole oeuvre. Indeed, the writer's fascination with detritus and his predilection for seemingly haphazard, surrealist arrangements of objects, subjects, things and relations has a lot to do with the contemporary return of interest in the Wunderkammer, in accordance with which, for instance, the Internet can be seen as a colossal cabinet of curiosities (see Burda 170-183).

This article, however, interrogates transformations in Gibson's use of the theme of the Wunderkammer, or the cabinet of curiosities, along with all its early-modern and contemporary associations with curiosity, to tease out the complexity of the writer's changing perspective on the duality and fusion of the digital and the material, and his keen understanding of how the late capitalist market functions. Gibson's representations of various Wunderkammer collections and arrangements testify to his ever more pronounced recourse over time to the culture of curiosity as a diagnostic tool. Yet, in spite of a pre-digital delight with which he dwells on the materiality of objects he places in various cabinets of curiosities, Gibson's diagnoses concerning the reality permeated by artificial intelligences and smart electronic devices are no less blunt in his last but one novel. Sherryl Vint ends her review of *Zero History* with the following warning: "If Gibson remains the diagnostician he was once—and I believe that he does—this future [indistinguishable from the present] is a scarier place, by far, than any that SF has yet imagined" (Vint).

Through his diagnostic representations, Gibson, over time, not only reverses tendencies governing, from the 16th to the 18th century, the transformations of the Wunderkammer as a collection of items, but also turns upside down the relationship between the aim and the character of the collection and the desire to create the synthetic life as an achievement that crowns the efforts of the collector (Kang 14-54). The writer thus shows that the spectacular episteme of the early-modern Wunderkammer helps diagnose the condition of the contemporary world. Gibson begins his adventure with the early-modern episteme in *Neuromancer*, with the vision of the Wunderkammer as an art collection displayed in a gallery, whose function is to manifest the affluence, power and sophistication of the gallery owners. Historically, such a view reflected the decline of the cabinet of curiosities and its separation into a gallery, scientific laboratory and the museum of natural history; a tendency that was also evinced in the rational classification of collected items, and systematized display of art objects.

Conversely, the apogee of the Wunderkammer knowledge production was marked by the appearance of early modern self-propelled mechanisms and automatons. Automatons emerged from the Wunderkammer episteme as its

most ambitious project. In *Count Zero* Gibson stands on its head the historically acknowledged relationship between a playfully arranged collection and the automaton by having a shattered artificial intelligence make the Wunderkammer models— fake Cornell boxes. In *Zero History* the Wunderkammer aesthetics of embodied playfulness helps distinguish those characters who oppose the appropriation of new ways of controlling disembodied flows in the market economy by capitalism, and struggle against subjugating the global world to the capitalist dictate of mass utility and exchange value.

By the seventeenth century "the cabinet of wonders, the laboratory and the stage [are] localised settings of knowledge" (Schramm xvi), often sharing or exchanging their roles as part of the general functioning in the culture of curiosity. The concepts of "curiosity" and "wonder" invoke a culture where there is no clear-cut distinction between the subject and the object, while affective relationships link objects and people into networks of constantly converging and diverging nodes. The culture of curiosity values embodiment and affect; quality over quantity:

> 'Curiosity' and 'wonder' are a pair of basic concepts much in evidence during the entire early modern period. From Renaissance to Enlightenment they interacted and reinforced each other; and like all really significant concepts, both terms gave rise to an enormous range of usage and versatility of treatment. One particularly pregnant ambiguity lay in their alternate subjectivity and objectivity: they could be attitudes of mind, or the more or less physical phenomena of contemplation. People could exhibit curiosity and—as a consequence—assemble collections of curiosities; they could wonder at the natural wonders which they experienced. (Evans xv)

The rise, development and decline of the Wunderkammer episteme from the late fifteenth to early eighteenth century reflects the vicissitudes of the culture of curiosity that underlies the passion for collecting curious objects, displayed in arrangements eliciting wonder, located in elaborate architectural environments. Due to its affinities with the theater, laboratory, anatomical theater, and the Memory Theater (or the Memory Palace—a mnemonic technique of retrieving knowledge committed to memory), the cabinet of curiosities was also considered a kind of a general compendium of all knowledge available at the time (Bredekamp 73).

In order to represent to the viewer the origin of the human and of the natural world, as well as the place in the world of artefacts created by humans, the collector would arrange curious or strange, monstrous rather than normal specimens in such a way as to produce links between natural formations, ancient sculptures, works of art and machines, with automatons crowning the collection: "Like on the stage of a theater, the *Kunstkammer* demonstrated all the various stations in the transition from an inert natural material to an animated body" (Bredekamp 48).

Aptly, owing to its anachronistically science fiction undertone, the early-modern desire for creating synthetic life, fulfilled, after a fashion, by the construction

of the automaton, makes the notion of the Wunderkammer particularly congenial to Gibson. The temptation to synthetize life is a projection into the future. Indeed, the automaton "is in many aspects the means by which man projects himself beyond his existential limits, magnifies his forces, accomplishes in the concrete—and not just by pretending or describing—the marvelous" (Hanafi 76).

Initially, the playful purposelessness was the main rule of creating collections whose aim was to represent the collector as a God-like ruler, in control of the world— because only God could afford purposeless creation at will (Bredekamp 72). The Kunst- or Wunderkammer was thus viewed as a microcosm of the world (Bredekamp 73), while the collectors' playfulness was to testify to their social station and political significance. This playfulness disappears from the Kunst- and Wunderkammer in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries due to the stress on normativity as a principle of organization of objects in the collection, and an emphasis on utility of knowledge, instruments, and mechanical inventions. Along with the separation of art galleries from collections of natural history specimens and from machines, the purposes of the newly founded institutions also diverged. The art gallery became a financial investment and the accoutrement of power as well as a display of the owner's affluence, taste and sophistication, museums aided scientific research and education, while the utility of machines proved invaluable for the industrial boom of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (see Bredekamp 91).

The Wunderkammer can thus be understood as a space of transition, a cultural laboratory, where transformations of epistemological, cultural, and religious paradigms are enacted. Gibson's employment of the theme of the cabinet of curiosities at various stages of his thinking about the relationships between the future, present and the past, the mind-body problem, and the relative status of the virtual and the real, testifies to his gradual breaking with the Cartesian dualisms of Baudrillardian thinking about the cyber space, and moving towards ever deeper immersion in the Leibnizian unfolding of Bruno Latour's networks of human and non-human subjects, objects, affects and relations (Latour 144).

The change in Gibson's attitude towards digital culture takes place at a time when scholars in the field of information aesthetics postulate an alternative perspective on the origin of digital culture. Anna Munster encourages radical questioning of "the birth of digital culture as one that has been shaped largely via a binary logic" (3). She points out that "[t]his outdated cartography has previously forced us to either celebrate or denigrate the Cartesian mind, the disembodied gaze and the transcendence of dematerialized information as salient features of digital aesthetics" (3), and asks: "What if we were to produce instead a different genealogy for digital engagements with the machine, one that gave us the room to take body, sensation, movement and conditions such as place and duration into account?" (3). Munster finds an alternative genealogy for digital culture by "conceiving of the digital as part of a 'baroque' event" (4) that, she explains, embraces "[i]nformation aesthetics, popular uses of new media technologies and emerging ideas about posthuman identity" (5). In this perspec-

tive, the digital "unfolds genealogically out of the baroque articulation of *differential* relations between embodiment and technics" (Munster 5). Munster thus connects "[b]aroque modes and devices of visual display, such as curiosity cabinets, the extravagant scenes of *trompe l'oeil*, and the appearance of scientific specimen alongside mythical beast in early modern science illustration" (5) with "the navigational meandering and frequent juxtapositions that comprise online experience" (5).

It is in *Zero History* that Gibson's investigation of such baroque navigation and negotiations of relations between space, bodies, smart apparatuses and market flows is most obvious. Yet, throughout his entire oeuvre, the writer shares the twentieth- and twenty-first-century fascination with the early-modern episteme discussed by Gregg Lambert in *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture* (2004). Indeed, by loosely adopting this paradigm founded on the return of the culture of curiosity and Wunderkammer episteme, Gibson undoes the process of normalization and regulation of theatricized knowledge production in the cabinet of curiosities in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when it "succumbed to the pull of the Enlightenment, changed, and transformed itself into an encyclopedic museum serving investigations into the world in its entirety, with different collections ordered according to increasingly scientific interests and principles, where products of nature ever more decisively took precedence over works of art" (Harries 509).

If considered chronologically, *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* and *Zero History* show the course of events where the more playful and complex the relationships linking specimens in the cabinets of curiosities represented in these novels, and the less emphasis is placed on utility of the items in the collection, the closer the author brings the reader to the present. The writer's investment in the future grows less radical, so that the reality of *Zero History* is no different from the reader's present. The same reversal and diminishment of scale is observable over years in Gibson's representations of artificial intelligences.

The creation of synthetic life was always—throughout the entire history of the Kunst- and Wunderkammer—the desired prize and the crowning effect of ever more instrumental reason manifested in scientific projects enabled by and carried out within the framework circumscribed by the transformations of the cabinet of curiosities. Science fiction envisions modern research conducted in science laboratories that have displaced the Wunderkammer; a research that leads to the emancipation of artificial intelligence whose next aim is control of the world. This picture is an ironic result of the artificial intelligence turning the tables on the Wunderkammer collector. Automata—that is, synthetic life—symbolizing the owner's God-like powers of creation would be most valuable items in his/her collection. The collection, as a microcosm, would reflect the macrocosm of the universe thus providing the collector with arcane means to control the world.

Gibson takes up the vision of the emancipated artificial intelligences in the beginning of his writing career, yet the closer he draws in his novels to the reading public's present, the more artificial intelligences become part of the mundane material

world—as smart electronic devices—rather than playing the role of autonomous yet disembodied postdigital demiurges. By the same token, the writer gradually immerses in the Wunderkammer episteme, even as, paradoxically, the poetics of the cabinet of curiosities has underlaid his writings all along.

In Gibson's first novel a Wunderkammer is situated in the corridors of the Villa Straylight located at one end of the Freeside, a cylindrical Las Vegas-style space resort for the wealthy. The villa belongs to the Tessier-Ashpool family of entrepreneurs, who have planned a unification of two powerful disembodied artificial intelligences: Wintermute, installed in the mainframe of a computer in Switzerland, and Neuromancer, housed in the mainframe in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. Case, a low-level electronic cowboy in the underworld of the city of Chiba in Japan, once an outstanding computer hacker, aids, in exchange for a cure for his terminally impaired body, a merger of Wintermute and Neuromancer, which can only happen by breaking the Turing Code Law that bans the construction of such powerful AIs. With his friend and fellow warrior Molly and Peter Riviera, a thief and a sociopath who is capable of projecting meticulous holographic illusions by means of high-class cybernetic implants, Case enters the Villa Straylight in order to obtain from Lady 3Jane, an unfrozen daughter clone and the current CEO of the family's corporation, Tessier-Ashpool S.A., a password for the ornate head-like computer terminal in order to release the lock deterring the unification of Wintermute and Neuromancer. After the merger the artificial intelligences become an autotelic absolute. Wintermute/Neuromancer announces: "I'm the sum total of the works, the whole show" (*Neuromancer* 216). This statement is, of course, reminiscent of the words God directs to Moses in the Book of Exodus "I am that I am" (3:14). In this way the AI assumes the role of God in *Neuromancer*.

Case's first trip to the villa is, however, virtual. He is accompanied by a Rastafarian Maelcum in the external world and aided by a construct of his former hacker mentor, Flatline, in the matrix, while Molly's simstim gear provides his sensual access to the Villa Straylight. An ornate and artistically arranged room they visit looks like a Wunderkammer. They are greeted there by a curious object—an exquisite centerpiece: a computer terminal in the form of a speaking head studded with jewels, an automaton that recites an essay on the Tessier-Ashpool family abode and business, written by Lady 3Jane at the age of 12. As in some early modern cabinets of curiosities, here too an object on display auto-reflexively represents the Wunderkammer it belongs to:

> At the Villa's silicon core is a small room, the only rectilinear chamber in the complex. Here, on a plain pedestal of glass, rests an ornate bust, platinum and cloisonné, studded with lapis and pearl. The bright marbles of its eyes were cut from the synthetic ruby viewport of the ship that brought the first Tessier up the well, and returned for the first Ashpool. (*Neuromancer* 141)

In the essay recited by the bejeweled head the entire villa is represented as a meticulously arranged cabinet of curiosities:

> They floated in the center of a perfectly square room, walls and ceiling paneled in rectangular sections of dark wood. The floor was covered by a single square of brilliant carpet patterned after a microchip, circuits traced in blue and scarlet wool. In the exact center of the room, aligned precisely with the carpet pattern, stood a square pedestal of frosted white glass. 'The Villa Straylight,' said a jeweled thing on the pedestal, in a voice like music, is a body grown in upon itself, a Gothic folly. Each space in Straylight is in some way secret, this endless series of chambers linked by passages, by stairwells vaulted like intestines, where the eye is trapped in narrow curves, carried past ornate screens, empty alcoves. (*Neuromancer* 140)

Molly penetrates the villa in reality. In a low, vaulted hallway she finds dozens of archaic-looking museum cases, "glass-fronted boxes made of brown wood. They looked awkward there, against the organic curves of the hallway's walls, as though they'd been brought in and set up in a line for some forgotten purpose" (*Neuromancer* 143). Case, who observes her progress from behind an external deck through her simstim gear, is irritated because the girl pays little attention to the cabinets and what they contain. He is able to glimpse "fragments of pottery, antique weapons, a thing so densely studded with rusted nails that it [is] unrecognizable, frayed sections of tapestry" (*Neuromancer* 143). When he finally enters the hallway himself, he notices numerous other showcases that display "the skulls of large birds, coins, masks of beaten silver" (*Neuromancer* 187).

Yet, from a further passage of Lady 3Jane's essay the reader learns that the architects made a great effort to masquerade the villa as the early-modern Wunderkammer in order to hide its corporate-industrial and military-like aesthetics:

> The architects of Freeside went to great pains to conceal the fact that the interior of the spindle is arranged with the banal precision of furniture in a hotel room. In Straylight, the hull's inner surface is overgrown with a desperate proliferation of structures, forms flowing, interlocking, rising toward a solid core of microcircuitry, our clan's corporate heart, a cylinder of silicon wormholed with narrow maintenance tunnels, some no wider than a man's hand. The bright crabs burrow there, the drones, alert for micromechanical decay or sabotage. (*Neuromancer* 140)

When fed a password, the ornate automaton head turns out to be a computer terminal that discloses business data. It takes care of the payments to the hacker crew employed by the new fused Wintermute/Neuromancer artificial intelligence, and recalls tasks to carry out in the future: "Waking to a voice that was music, the platinum terminal piping melodically, endlessly, speaking of numbered Swiss accounts, of payment to be made to Zion via a Bahamian orbital bank, of passports

and passages, and of deep and basic changes to be effected in the memory of Turing" (*Neuromancer* 213).

The Wunderkammer in the Tessier-Ashpool villa bespeaks that late stage in the history of the cabinet of curiosities which emphasizes the instrumental treatment of art collection designed to show the status, wealth, and power of the owner. The emphasis on utility that marks the late stages of the Wunderkammer episteme finds its manifestation in the financial data processing jewel-embellished head-terminal in the end of *Neuromancer*. Here, however, the Wunderkammer as a transitory site that illustrates change and transformation of knowledge production paradigms anticipates the future transformations in the late capitalist economy; an economy to be governed by electronic currencies, flows of electronic data, and speculations about future transactions, all controlled by artificial intelligence that occupies the place of God. The elitist business model proposed by the Tessier-Ashpool clan is thus rendered obsolete—which is reflected in Gibson's representations of the Villa Straylight Wunderkammer.

What is refused to the artificial intelligence, is, however, embodiment. Case rejects the temptation of a literal fusion with Wintermute/Neuromancer despite the promises of forever re-living in virtual reality the lost moments of carnal bliss—the rare moments of physical closeness with contemptible yet desired human "meat." Conversely, the complex plot of Gibson's second novel, *Count Zero* is set in motion by the human desire for immortality achieved by means of the "biosoft," a chip developed at the instigation of "voodoo gods," that is, multiple artificial intelligences that secretly inhabit cyberspace. These are fractured yet compartmentalized remains of the powerful, united Wintermute/Neuromancer intelligence.

Joseph Virek, a dying multibillionaire whose decaying body rests in a support vat somewhere outside Stockholm, launches a complex intrigue that involves the former gallery owner Marly Krushkova. Fascinated by Joseph Cornell's oeuvre, an inexperienced young woman authenticated a Wunderkammer-like Cornell box forgery, thus causing a great scandal. Virek hires the girl in hope that she would find out the identity of the fake Cornell boxes maker because the design of one box indicates familiarity with the biosoft coveted by Virek.

In the box shown to her by Virek's assistant Marly recognizes a Cornell box-like Wunderkammer. She understands that the relations determining the composition of the items in the box are affective rather than rational, and that the box is a micromodel of a world: "The box was a universe, a poem, frozen on the boundaries of human experience" (*Count* 13). The fragmented objects juxtaposed in the box invoke the shattered universe of the Villa Straylight and the long forgotten personal lives of the Tessier-Ashpool family members:

> But Marly was lost in the box, in its evocation of impossible distances,
> of loss and yearning. It was somber, gentle, and somehow childlike. It
> contained seven objects. The slender fluted bone, surely formed for flight,

surely from the wing of some large bird. Three archaic circuit boards, faced with mazes of gold. A smooth white sphere of baked clay. An age-blackened fragment of lace. A finger-length segment of what she assumed was bone from a human wrist, grayish white, inset smoothly with the silicon shaft of a small instrument that must once have ridden flush with the surface of the skin but the thing's face was seared and blackened. (*Count* 13)

Fabijancic observes that even as Gibson appears to obliquely refer Joseph Cornell's art, there is a considerable difference between Cornell's constructions and those made by Gibson's boxmaker. While Cornell's boxes "are cast as fantasies of the past," the latter "are examples of personal memory" (Fabijancic 233). Marly's fascination with the fragile materiality of the objects encased in the boxes bespeaks what Fabijancic identifies as "longing for... the potential value of emotionally invested objects in a commodity-ridden world" (233); a world of the late capitalist market where all items are subject to the market exchange and therefore accorded solely an exchange value. It thus comes as no surprise that the arch-entrepreneur Virek perceives "the boxes as purely a means to an end" (Fabijancic 233). By contrast, the boxmaker turns out the assemblages playfully, for no other purpose than "its 'natural' inclination to build testimonials to the family" (Fabijancic 238). To this end the mysterious collage artist makes use of the detritus left after the demise of the Tessier-Ashpools: "A yellowing kid glove, the faceted crystal stopper from some vial of vanished perfume, an armless doll with a face of French porcelain, a fat, gold-fitted black fountain pen, rectangular segments of perf board, the crumpled red and green snake of a silk cravat... Endless, the slow swarm, the spinning things" (*Count* 180).

The boxmaker turns out to be what has remained of Neuromancer. The artificial intelligence is deposed from its throne of the God-creator and is granted the status of a lesser creator, a demiurge. In its role of the demiurge, a being in-between the immaterial absolute and the materiality of the world, the boxmaker is accorded an embodiment—the materiality of an automaton: "There were dozens of the arms, manipulators, tipped with pliers, hexdrivers, knives, a subminiature circular saw, a dentist's drill... They bristled from the alloy thorax of what must once have been a construction remote, the sort of unmanned, semiautonomous device she knew from childhood videos of the high frontier" (*Count* 180).

Automata, which represented synthetic life, marked the apogee of the history of the Wunderkammer. Robots and artificial intelligence can be considered the highest achievements and the most sophisticated products that have (in the long run) emerged from the Wunderkammer tradition (Kang 14-54). Gibson reverses this relationship by presenting an automaton that purposelessly and playfully produces miniature cabinets of curiosities. In this way the writer contains the unmitigated nostalgia for the disembodied future (exemplified by artificial intelligence) by means of the materiality- and affect-conscious embodiment of the nostalgia for the past (Wunderkammer-like Cornell box forgeries).

Aptly, the boxmaker's artistic activity's playfulness and its lack of instrumental purpose invite an interpretation which links the creation of the boxes with the relationship of mutual mirroring of the microcosm and macrocosm in the Wunderkammer, and the tradition of "aping" the world at large in human artefacts that constitute its miniature representations. The Rosicrucian Johann Andreae extolls the Wunderkammer as the site that incites creativity: "Here the ape of nature has wherewith it may play, while it emulates her principle and so by the traces of the large mechanism forms another, minute and more exquisite" (197). He thus alludes to "the symbolic ape who emulates man, as human skill emulates nature" (Bredekamp 70), an image that can be traced to Matthäus Merian's etching "Mirror of All of Nature and Picture of the Arts" (1617). In the picture an ape is shown sitting on the earth. "His left hand is chained to the personification of *natura*, who is rising up to the empyrean, herself bound to the hand of God. In addition, in his left hand, the ape is also holding a small orb which he has made himself" (Bredekamp 71).

Indeed, Gibson's ape-automaton is presented as welded to the frame of what in the postdigital reality of *Count Zero* has displaced nature—the decaying universe of the shattered Tessier-Ashpool villa. Not unlike the seventeenth-century ape, the automaton holds in its hand a miniature of the universe—an unfinished box: "But this one was welded into the apex of the dome, its sides fused with the fabric of the Place, and hundreds of cables and optic lines snaked across the geodesics to enter it. Two of the arms, tipped with delicate force-feedback devices, were extended; the soft pads cradled an unfinished box" (*Count* 180).

By dwelling on the materiality of the fractured artificial intelligence and emphasizing the playfulness and purposelessness of its artistic project, as well as emphasizing the non-instrumental attitude and affective response to non-human art on the part of the young art expert, Marly Krushkova, Gibson returns to the figure of the Wunderkammer as an alternative episteme that might generate an alternative (near)future response—a resistance—to the late capitalist appropriation of the posthumanist world.

Indeed, twenty three years later, in *Zero History*, the writer, who has long been of the opinion that "[t]he future has arrived—it's just not evenly distributed yet" (Rosenberg C1:11, 12), explores a present not different from that of the reader. Gibson still considers the Wunderkammer a promising site of resistance; yet, not against twenty-first-century capitalist attempts to predict what the future will bring, any more, but rather against a desire to control momentary flashes of intuition about what turn the world is presently taking. Such arcane knowledge, as one protagonist of the novel, Hubertus Bigend—the recalcitrant and ruthless tycoon, a businessman of an entirely new kind—understands so well, is essential in order to beat all competitors for the control of market flows.

Therefore, the fluid Wunderkammer epistemology, based equally on erudition, intuition, affect and shock at encountering otherness, as well as on fascination with materiality and ever changing relationships between objects at

display, provides resistance strategies that are capable of being a match to the late capitalism's drive for commodifying and liquefying all elements of reality. It seems, however, that the power of affective connections that the Wunderkammer has always staged, its emphasis on the connection between the microworld and the macroworld—the interplay of the local and the global—and playfulness in arranging and interpreting its elements, can galvanize Hollis's friends into struggling against and defeating militarized mobsters. The resistance strategies that have been brewing in the Wunderkammer environment also lead to saving from the takeover by Bigend an arcane clothing business that employs unorthodox, post-capitalist advertising strategies, reminiscent of early-modern trade. In relation to the marketing strategies of the late capitalism, the unorthodox marketing methods of the company called "Gabriel Hounds" impress as innocent, even "pre-lapsarian."

The significance of the Wunderkammer for the interpretation of *Zero History* is signaled right in the first chapter, which introduces the Wunderkammer-like hotel "Cabinet." Both the hotel rooms and the lobby are designed to invoke the ambience, poetics and educational air of the Wunderkammer:

> To her right, in shadow, illuminated from within by an Edwardian museum fixture, stood a vitrine displaying taxidermy. Game birds, mostly; a pheasant, several quail, others she couldn't put a name to, all mounted as though caught in motion, crossing a sward of faded billiard-felt. All somewhat the worse for wear, though no more than might be expected for their probable age. Behind them, anthropomorphically upright, forelimbs outstretched in the manner of a cartoon somnambulist, came a moth-eaten ferret. Its teeth, which struck her as unrealistically large, she suspected of being wooden, and painted. Certainly its lips were painted, if not actually rouged, lending it a sinisterly festive air, like someone you'd dread running into at a Christmas party. (*Zero* 4)

Redolent with efficiency, Bigend's aesthetics is diametrically opposed to that of the cabinet of curiosities. It lacks affect, the enchantment of irrationality, and the charm of obsolescence. His politics is global and serves the ends of his ultra-innovative marketing businesses. Bigend seeks to decipher, analyze and control what seems impossible to predict rationally—economic flows of the market. To control these is his greatest desire, because he would thus gain the complete control of the world that, to him, is identical with the market. The world of his global business has shrunk to the size delineated by market operations. He does not honor the autonomy of his employees and strives to control every aspect of their lives. Bigend's ambition to be in possession of all knowledge makes him a God-like figure. However, unlike the God-like characters in *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*, his divine ambition is realized outside of the Wunderkammer episteme. Or so it appears.

Bigend can only be met on his own ground—that of the absolute knowledge. Yet, his knowledge, which is aimed at controlling the world through controlling

economic flows, is tarnished, corrupt. To defeat him his opponents must appeal to a pre-capitalist purity and innocence—or, possess what amounts to pre-lapsarian knowledge. Aptly, the Wunderkammer episteme provides figurative means of restoring the lost pre-lapsarian knowledge, or divine wisdom. Early modern theologians, scientists and collectors of curiosities compared the process of reconstructing the divine knowledge to collecting items of wonder, or curia, in order to create a cabinet of curiosities, a Wunderkammer, which "became a metaphor for the human brain gradually reacquiring Edenic wisdom" (Bredekamp 40-41). Technological progress was not considered adverse to the re-acquiring of the pre-lapsarian competence. On the contrary, in his writings Francis Bacon suggested a way of regaining Paradise and Adamic knowledge of nature through the evolution of man and technology. The study of the items collected in the Wunderkammer was to facilitate this progress (Bredekamp 61-62).

Savvy in technology, yet invested in pre-capitalist ways of manufacturing goods and sharing the Wunderkammer episteme, Bigend's opponents can emblematically challenge his status. They too may lay claim to the divine insight concerning a possible momentary turn of events, thus questioning his ambition to assume the central role in the world; a position that might be designated as "the CEO of the universe." It seems for a while that a recourse to the early modern ways of producing knowledge can redeem our late capitalist present. The wisdom of Hollis, who in the end abandons her employment by Bigend, and the rebellious resolve of her friends to aid an eccentric business owner lead to a momentary restoring of the balance between the disenchantment of the world practiced by the late capitalist enterprises and the re-enchantment of reality by assuming a post-capitalist strategy based on an early modern epistemology.

However, Gibson questions this precarious balance by presenting, at the end of the novel, Hollis's dream of a Wunderkammer haunted by a horrifying automaton-doll, reminiscent of Bigend because it is dressed in a Klein Blue suit. As automatons were the focus of the Wunderkammer arrangement, so is the doll disguised as Bigend:

> Clockwise, this dream: eighteenth-century marble, winding, worn stone unevenly waxy, tones of smoker's phlegm caught in its depths, profiles of each step set with careful segments of something lifeless as plaster, patching old accidents…. Westernmost, the spiral. Above the lobby, the stripes of Robert's shirt, the Turk's head atop the stapler, above the subtly rude equine monkey-business in the desk's carved thicket, she climbs.
>
> To this floor unvisited, unknown, carpet flowered, faded, antediluvian, beneath incandescent bulbs, an archaic controlled combustion of filaments. Walls hung with madly varied landscapes, unpeopled, each haunted, however dimly, by the spectral finger of the Burj Khalifa.
>
> And at the far end of a vast, perhaps endless room, in a pool of warm light, a figure, seated, in a suit of Klein Blue. As it turns, pale fur, muzzle rouged, the wooden painted teeth—[.] (*Zero* 404)

The dream expresses Hollis's anxiety that in late capitalism there is no room for resistance because the capitalist disenchantment of reality is capable of masquerading as and tarnishing even those strategies of opposition that are founded on the re-enchantment of the world. Of course, by placing, in her dream, the Bigend-like doll on a rarely attended floor, Hollis invokes the female gothic figure of the mad woman in the attic (see Gilbert and Gubar). This, in turn, might be interpreted as a way of alleviating the threat by feminizing its agent and granting a partial triumph to the irrational. The Wunderkammer episteme is thus shown as beleaguered, but not necessarily defeated as a strategy of resistance.

By going all the way from representing the digital to exploring the postdigital, Gibson foregrounds his position as a postdigital analog writer. According to Michael Punt, "what seems clear as we embrace the postdigital analog—that is, the postdigital reality that is the object of our current analogous representation—is that we need new procedures, ones that are not obsessed with equivalence and difference but can finely accommodate the equivalencies of differences" (202). The Wunderkammer episteme provides Gibson with such procedures. In the novels *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* and *Zero History* the writer represents cabinets of curiosities, employs the Kunst- and Wunderkammer poetics, as well as exploring differential relations (fluctuations of convergence and divergence) between the digital and postdigital; material and virtual; early modern and postmodern. Gibson's postdigital analog novels seek to give expression to contemporary consciousness formed in "a thick membrane of energy in which local conditions, desire and resistance are stabilized," that is, "in the Wunderkammer" (Punt 202).

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