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## “Melancholy bitter castle of eagles” Jon Knowles Visits the Redpath Museum

To talk about my museum means discussing the ways and means of analyzing fraud. The ordinary museum and its representatives simply present one form of truth. To talk about this museum means speaking about the conditions of truth. It is also important to find out whether or not the fictional museum casts a new light on the mechanisms of art, the artistic life, and society. I pose the question with my museum. Therefore I do not find it necessary to produce the answer.

Marcel Broodthaers, in an interview with Johannes Cladders, in *INK-Dokumentation* 4, Zurich, 1979, p.32

Montreal-based artist and educator Jon Knowles and I recently met at Redpath Museum to imagine how subversive artists' approaches might reopen the cabinet of curiosities. The Abe Levine Mollusc Collection provided a backdrop to our

discussion on contemporary art, the life of public collections, personal collecting habits, museum displays, shrunken heads and narwhal tusks. Hidden behind wooden cases lined with mollusc shells, Jon Knowles discovered and dusted off a plaque-mounted article showing Quebec's premiere mollusc collector Abe Levine in all of his glory, beaming over his collection and wearing a mollusc-shell pattern shirt.

Peculiar, spectacular or curious, personal collections often go off on a tangent; institutional collections imply ordered knowledge and rigorous taxonomy. Nonetheless, classification is a concern for both the amateur and professional collector. In the Victorian Redpath Museum — completed in 1882 to house the collections of McGill's principal, Sir William Dawson, but still used as a teaching museum for paleontology, zoology, mineralogy and ethnology — the two systems collide: specimens acquired and catalogued by museum professionals are presented alongside collections that sprang from an individual's enthusiasm. The institutional acquisition process is a form of legitimization; the intuitive method of an individual more often arises from a feverish need to possess. However, both approaches touch on the human compulsion to accumulate and organize.

In works of art that layer objects and the process of their discovery, Jon Knowles interweaves his thinking as an educator with his provocative approach to making art. With the artist collective Knowles Eddy Knowles, he has camped out in an urban lean-to while tracking the history of razor design and participated in the 2004 “Informal Architectures” residency. His own work bears traces of his studies at conceptual leaning NSCAD, but with a sly, sophisticated visual humour that is informed by the meanings attached to objects over time, not only through the canon of art history but also through the imagination of popular culture. His recent works such as “History Has a Lot of Ankles in Its Maw, and Is Pulling Straight Down” (2008) in which Knowles collected fifty LP copies of Pink Floyd's *The Wall* and “Robert Smithson's Record Collection” (2008) where the artist exhibited his re-collection of the records of Smithson, upend the usual categorizations of everyday stuff and invest the artist with the role of scavenger to digest and represent contemporary culture.

In 2007, Knowles was invited to present a new work in *Actual*, an exhibition curated by Emily Jones at the Dalhousie Art Gallery. Starting from Sol Lewitt's dictum “Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically”, the exhibition investigated “systems inherent in art culture but also of the world in general.” The gallery's first acquisition (albeit informal) of a John

James Audubon engraving of a Black Vulture or Carrion Crow, inspired Knowles to propose adding a live vulture to the permanent collection. The paradox of a live bird residing in the storage reserves of an art museum suggests a new hybrid sanctuary, animating a labyrinth of vaults with the flap of dark wings and soft hisses as the vulture uses its keen eyesight to navigate among the dormant masterworks. The vulture-in-residence could create new artworks in the vaults' static spaces, laying eggs in the hollows of mobile storage screens, regurgitating scraps of artworks to feed its young, adorning Old Masters with its droppings.

In 1972, Marcel Broodthaers founded a “strange bird of prey aviary”<sup>2</sup> in the fictional museum project Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures. Instead of making works for exhibition, Broodthaers acted as curator, borrowing artworks and objects from other institutions to create his installation. His work was thus the exhibition itself, rather than the artworks exhibited. Held at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, the project included 282 objects, each bearing the figure of an eagle,<sup>3</sup> from eagle-adorned jewellery and typewriters to taxidermy and nature studies. Including the museum letterhead, correspondence and the crates, the objects arrived in as part of the installation. Broodthaers valued each object not for its intended use but for its relation to the theme he had chosen. In treating things and their representations as equivalents and by organizing the objects by their method of presentation, Broodthaers abjured standard museum modes of display. Like a Wunderkammer, Broodthaers's “Department of Eagles” combined both the natural and the artificial, art and non-art. However, in contrast to the tradition of the Wunderkammer, Broodthaers's goal in disordering the taxonomy of cultural specimens was not to provoke a sense of wonder but to reveal the museum as a temporary framework.

Knowles's proposal for *Actual*, too, complicates the customs of the collection, making the content of his art work both his complicity with and challenge to the structure of the gallery. Knowles's final display at the Dalhousie Art Gallery entitled *Coragyps atratus* (a work in progress) DAG 1984-61 consisted of a traditional hanging of the Audubon print on a 19<sup>th</sup> century study salon style royal purple wall and museum cases containing the adoption certificate of an American Black Vulture, a photograph of the vulture, correspondence of various types, a 10-pound bank note picturing Darwin, as well as travel photos in England, France, Germany. The work by Audubon was charged by Knowles' intervention. Invested with a potency it has perhaps never known as an artwork, the engraving awoke to its multiple associations as a cultural object—a scientific study, an exotic vision of American wildlife—and as a living creature living on the fringes of populated areas, feeding on carrion. Knowles's process resembles that of the imagined crow-in-residence, creating new, scavenged works in the form of letters, emails, requests and special meetings that evolved in response to the artist's request. The vulture herself, Zelda, lives unfettered by her new status as art object in a wildlife shelter in North Carolina.

When asked to comment on the meaning of his exhibition, Broodthaers refused to supply a direct analysis — having opened the door to multiple readings, his judicious response was to leave the door open. As part of a networked community operating outside the role of either an institutional or strictly private collector, contemporary artists like Jon Knowles are poised to reinterpret the problematic defined by Broodthaers. In our current climate of rapid re-contextualization, the artist — scavenger takes on a new potential. Prying open the Wunderkammer to draw forward



Marcel Broodthaers, *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, 1972.

Photo: Maria Glissen. Courtesy of The MIT Press from the book *Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs*, edited by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1988.

objects and ideas collected from the past and present, they revel and take awful pleasure in the idea that no one path is absolute.

#### INTERVIEW

**Meredith Carruthers:** What new possibilities does the cabinet of wonder allow for?

**Jon Knowles:** I think the cabinet of wonder might offer a potential to work in a mode that feigns the antique. So long as this strategy is taken up with a reconciliation of past, present and future. In keeping with the Broodthaers theme, I believe the effectiveness of his strategy lies in this sense of the performance of something “old” (not just his preference of scrappy used goods) where he over-identifies with this role of museum director at a time when museums were being charged with failing to serve their public. This, combined with his interest in the framing devices of the institution is what is important, lending it this status of so-called “Institutional Critique”. I am a student of context-art, so Broodthaers is not too far away. For me, rainbows, crystals, unicorns, spider webs, taxidermied creatures of all kinds are not at all interesting in and of themselves, though it is common to walk into a gallery and see those things unmediated. Among other questions, I ask why and how these things are presented the way they are, and why are they being presented to me now, today in 2009? Why do I desire them?

**M.C.:** Can you tell me more about your thinking process in developing the project?

**J.K.:** In developing *Coragyps Atratus* (and I suppose other works involving a collecting ethos) I wanted to ask questions about this

feverish impulse towards collecting and how this could be narrativized, and re-evaluated, as opposed to the often uncritical adoption of collecting assumed as a negative value, suggesting a psychological disorder—the hoarder, the fetishist, the completist, etc. though those are extremely interesting aspects when thinking about the cabinet of wonder within modern society. In a way, I subject myself to criticism, over-identifying with the bird to imagine my own faulty desire in being collected, as well as my own sense of living somewhat precariously as an artist and assuming other art roles periodically. As someone like Andrea Fraser might suggest, the concern is not simply the institution of art, but the subjectivity of the artists that confirms or enables and serves themselves through the institution.

**M.C.:** Was the project developed in response to the curatorial direction of the exhibition, “Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically”?

**J.K.:** The initial direction of the exhibition had more to do with showcasing emerging artists born, living or schooled in Halifax. This sense of the emerging artist, a potential youthful specimen of cultural capital and my own distrust of the term emerging was actually the main starting point for deciding to do a work in this museological way.

**M.C.:** In the gallery you created a specific display for your correspondence, how does this « new » artwork function as an intervention in the holding of the collection?

**J.K.:** I find the word intervention to have quite abrupt meaning, I prefer something that is smooth, ongoing, and below the radar. Now that everyone “intervenes” perhaps artists should establish



a new language for these activities. There are several threads of the installation as it was first exhibited, and which would invariably be altered according to the galleries demands if they were to show it again. My work includes my proposal to the gallery; my library research findings with books and documents; a 10 pound British bank note picturing Darwin, an early referencer of Audubon; photographs taken in London of BBC TV host/naturalist Bill Oddie's car (the modern day Audubon!); correspondences with a director of a small heritage museum in Nova Scotia dedicated to Thomas McCulloch a Scottish teacher and first president of Dalhousie University. These were all considered supplementary elements and arranged as a constellation of entry points without "punchline". The actual documents pertaining to Zelda's adoption by the gallery, as well as any subsequent documents that arise from this adoption are the primary piece. This all in effect "bookends" the original John James Audubon work (which is displayed on a separate wall, painted a deep violet, a colour that was specific to Audubon's exhibition demands found in his letters). My work is a sort of detournement of the Audubon work. The new work implies a corrective to the underlying violence of the original, where Audubon had to kill of the birds of America, in order to study them (no doubt for practical reasons). Here, I am providing an inversion of this act by insisting on the black vulture's care and well being, as a riff on the didactic in art. An ethical imagining that is mirrored in my proposal that the adoption not just reside as a temporary engagement but as a legitimate acquisition through the collection committee that is renewed every year, in perpetuity as it were. Is it a new conception of an artwork, or a metaphor for the existing tendencies of acquisition?

**M.C.:** Does your project become an appendage to the original work of art? Or is the Audubon work subsumed and re-contextualized in the Jon Knowles artwork?

**J.K.:** It is both. The meaning of the Audubon obviously changes when it is exhibited alongside or subsumed in my work. The two works (Audubon's and mine) are like two peas in a pod (or storage vault as it were) — ostensibly showing the same thing but with a completely distinct language, mode of address, style of representation and political reality. I would not go so far as to turn it into an ironing board, but I think artists subsuming other artists works can be an exercise in historical modesty, though some might cynically see it as piggy backing of the masters! I am not so naïve to think that this strategy, as a kind of project based practice is not without its clichés, but I do think it is equally foolish to go on working as if inspiration-studio-presentation-reception is a one-way street.

**M.C.:** In other works such as your ongoing project to re-establish Robert Smithson's record collection, you take an active role as an artist-collector. Can you talk more about what this role means to you in your work?

**J.K.:** Roles should always be reconsidered, but I would not lament the genuine need for a materialist position in artmaking, so maybe the "artist collector" could operate within that framework? I am not suggesting that one should go digging around in flea-markets and thrift shops; it quickly became a normalized routine as the way Surrealism is generally understood. I think of my collecting as a form of sly performance and it is my living labour. For me, it is one way to proceed in art-making, one way to reconcile the fact that a work need not necessarily be made from scratch, but re-evaluated, re-ordered, re-positioned..

**M.C.:** Marcel Broodthaers' "fictive museum takes its point of departure from the identity of art and eagle" (Marcel Broodthaers, Düsseldorf press release). In what way was your project for "Actual" inspired by or connected to this project?

**J.K.:** Broodthaers is anti-authoritarian as well being fiercely enigmatic for his time and place. I believe he teaches excellent lessons to the managers of art. So long as there is an acknowledgement that when he states he is making something insincere as in his early press release-cum-invitation-cum-language game for Galerie Saint-Laurent, it is not literal but rather rhetorical, he is performing the guy trying to survive and get by! As enigmatic as it is, and it sounds a bit corny, but when I first saw *Dept des Aigles* in Düsseldorf, I sensed this call for a need to challenge the preexisting systems of art. It came as a surprise, for me when I gave a talk about Broodthaers to learn that many people took offence to his gesture of liquidating the authority of "their" cherished eagle. I had people quoting scientific studies that the eagle is in fact the noblest bird!

MEREDITH CARRUTHERS

**Meredith Carruthers** is a writer, curator and artist based in Montreal. As part of the artist/curator initiative Leisure Projects she has produced exhibitions and special projects in collaboration with venues in Canada and abroad. She currently works in the Exhibitions, Programs Division of the Canadian Centre for Architecture (Montreal).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jon Knowles is a mixed media artist, born in Oshawa, Ontario, and now residing in Montréal Québec. He studied at NSCAD University, the Cooper Union and Concordia University. Recent exhibitions include *Rien ne se perd, rien ne se crée, tout se transforme* The Québec Triennial at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, *The Perception of Ideas leads to new ideas* at the Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen Düsseldorf, *Exalted Beings: Animal Relationships*, and *Actual* both at Dalhousie Art Gallery, *Converse without leaving home* at Cooper Gallery, Dundee Scotland. Knowles has also been working with Michael Eddy (Frankfurt) and Robert Knowles (London) as the three-member collaborative Knowles Eddy Knowles, producing work for exhibitions, commissions, research and performance at TENT gallery (Rotterdam), Portikus (Frankfurt), Apex Art (New York), Presentation House (Vancouver) and Form Content (London).

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Meuris "Broodthaers-en-Allemagne" *Clés pour les Arts*, vol. 21 (May 1972), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> The only object in that exhibition that did not bear the image of an eagle was a painting of a castle. Its reproduction in the exhibition catalogue was captioned with a line from an earlier poem by Broodthaers: "Melancholy bitter castle of eagles."



Jan Knowles, *Zelda I*, 2008. Top: Zelda; bottom: Xena and Zelda. *Coragyps Atatus* (a work in progress) DAG 1984-6.1[supplements 5]. 2007-