

Cabinets of Wonders

On Creating and Collecting

JAN ŠVANKMAJER

*Translated from the Czech by
Gabriel M. Paletz and Ondřej Káral*

For me, obsession is the start of everything, and I invoke her as the most important muse, for her energy is desire. I don't make too much of a distinction between creating and collecting. Both are directed by the principle of passion, and in both, I'm basically passive. The objects of my desire seek me out, not I them, and it's similar with the subjects and objects of my movies. I'm like a sea sponge. But when I'm soaking, then it's heavily: this is what my obsession actually entails.

I don't care for either of the words *archive* or *curator*. They're redolent of documentation or museum work, neither of which interests me. Each creation involves me from the moment it transcends something that we can call a document of a period; that is, because of its many meanings, an imaginative work is always able to accumulate new interpretations and evoke new ones, as times change. An imaginative work is always able to react to the present, even if it originated in an entirely different era, as a reaction to an entirely different impulse.

I will always prefer a cabinet of wonders to a museum, as it has a completely different function from either a museum or a big state gallery. Whereas museums and galleries are edifying or "aesthetically cultivate" us, a cabinet of wonders initiates us. After leaving it, we are transformed. Museums are objective; a cabinet of wonders is subjective. Museums are organized rationally; a cabinet of wonders is organized emotionally. Objects in a museum are classified by the principle of identity; in a cabinet of wonders, the arrangement is directed by the principle of analogy, governed by what Roger Caillois calls "diagonal science." A cabinet of wonders is my latest obsession. For the last few years, I've been building one at my castle in the former granary, which I've dedicated to this purpose.

I've always admired the emperor Rudolf

II, even when it wasn't fashionable, and he was judged as a bad ruler and a freak. I admire him just because he was a bad ruler who neglected his duties in government for alchemy and his collections, and because he created an unbelievable cabinet of wonders to which he admitted only chosen people, regardless of title, with no gawkers to desecrate it. He blithely ruined the empire for his desires. He didn't give a shit about the war with Turkey, sat in the middle of his curiosities, and dreamed, transforming his life.

I've been collecting things my whole life. Their artistic, collectable, or actual value is not the decisive factor but rather the imaginative power glowing out of them, which can melt my spirit, that in turn can transmute base into precious metals. There are many formulas for producing a sorcerer's stone. The old alchemist manuscripts mention sulfur, mercury, salt, or lead, but not the chemical elements of sulfur, mercury, and salt; rather they are "live" sulfur, "live" mercury, "live" salt. It's similar with the objects I collect. These are only "live" objects, full of substances, memories, and emotions, which have gone through a ritual. And although they are usually old things, which already have the essential part of life behind them, with me, it's not an antiquarian interest.

[André] Breton once wrote that the most fantastic thing about the fantastic is that it's real. The surrealists never looked for the fantastic outside of this world. Science fiction didn't and doesn't interest them. If I place daily objects in my movies or art pieces in unrealistic relation to one another, it's because I want to evoke doubts in spectators about their everyday reality: to disturb the common utilitarianism that steamrolls this civilization. In connection with this, it's possible to speak of the slavery of utilitarianism. "Living" objects are becoming ones that are not alive, with which we don't communicate, that we only employ pragmatically. Objects of daily use have ceased to be cult objects, and our activities have ceased to be rituals.

Unfortunately, aside from happy exceptions (such as Ambras castle), the fate of outstanding cabinets of wonders has not escaped the repression of civilization (regardless of whether it was masked in any way): the pillaging of Rudolf's collection (first by Vienna, then



Jan Švankmajer's
Kunstkamera.
Photographs by Jan
Švankmajer.

by the Swedes, and then with the remainder sold away by the Czech estates to get money for mercenary soldiers). Breton's collection was given away by his daughter and grandson at an auction. It's significant that no official gallery or museum would buy this collection as a whole, despite its incalculable value. By the way, as far as I know, all the more remarkable seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cabinets in Bohemia were similarly dispersed. Official museums chose for their collections only the "more valuable" pieces, and the rest were sold at auction or ended up in depositories. A similar thing happened to the last historical cabinet of wonders in our territory, Hermína Srbová's collection, which was donated "by compulsion" to the state after 1945.¹

The cabinet of wonders that we're creating retains in principle the traditional division of a classical *Wunderkabinet*.

Naturalia represents my objects and collages of "natural science," in addition to selected natural things (mainly shells, corals, and minerals), put together into Arcimboldeque heads and busts.² A set of "natural mandalas" will be added here.

Exotica is represented by a collection of African and Oceanian masks and fetishes.

My alchemic objects (and the reconstruction of an alchemist's lab) stand as *Esoterica* (*mirabilia a mystica*), with Eva's cycle of paintings "Mutus liber," plus a cycle of my fetish objects, and a collection of drawings done through a medium.³

Artificialia represents a "thematic" collection on the Arcimboldeque principle that gathers together paintings and drawings from the eighteenth century to the present, plus a collection of Czech Art Brut and contemporary displays of surrealism in the visual arts.

So far, *Scientica* is represented by only a few collage pages from the "Technology" section of my Švankmajer Bilderlexikon and by a set of graphics of masturbation machines. But I also hope that "real" machines will be added. Perhaps in time, the fantasy *Militaria* will be here.

Primarily erotic-grotesque *Gaudia* appear throughout the whole collection.

For now, *Funeralia and horribilia* are represented by a collection of small ancestral sculptures from Africa, by reliquary figures

of Fangs and Bakots, and also by Czech folk shrines of the nineteenth century.

Vetustissima mainly presents examples of antique furniture, pieces made especially for this cabinet of wonders, and our personal ceramics.

However, the classification of a cabinet of wonders can never be exact and complete, as each of its themed areas permeates the others.

NOTES

1. *Translator's note:* While the Czech state began a process of nationalization—including nationalization of the film industry—after the war, most confiscations of property occurred following the communist coup.

2. *Editor's note:* Giuseppe Arcimboldo was a sixteenth-century Italian painter known for unusual portraits that replaced facial features with fruits, vegetables, animals, and other objects in a fashion reminiscent of the whimsy that typifies later surrealist practices.

3. *Editor's note:* Jan Švankmajer's wife, Eva Švankmajerová, passed away in 2005.

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