nienced, due to its semantic vagueness and brutal appropriation by the art market, or the 9th Berlin Biennale, regarded by many as in dangerous complicity with the market and the last act of an art chapter. Will this problematic connotation be somehow addressed in the exhibition?

IZ: Boris Groys recently stated that "the standard white cube is a thing of the past." Do you agree that the curator has to find a non-neutral configuration of the exhibition space, specific for each art presentation? How is the display conceived in your upcoming show?

considered different expressions and platforms, but fundamentally the core of the show is within the gallery setting of this museum, where each presentation of a work was discussed in depth with the artist, especially some of the video works that require a more custom-built space.

Mark Dion: Theatre of the Natural World

Interview by Hettie Judah

Whitechapel Gallery
77-82 Whitechapel High St.
London, UK
whitechapelgallery.org
Through May 13

Exploring the ideologies and institutions that have influenced our relationship with the natural world, Mark Dion appropriates scientific techniques and museological modes of display in works that challenge received ideas and conventions relating to our environment. The exhibition *Mark Dion: Theatre of the Natural World*, at London's Whitechapel Gallery brings together a number of large scale installations made by the artist since the 1990s. *Theatre of the Natural World* opens with a new commission made in response to the specific context of the show, reflecting Dion's strongly place-based working practice.

HETTIE JUDAH: The title *Theatre of the Natural World* suggests nature as a site of leisure, entertainment, or diverting spectacle.

MARK DION: I was thinking perhaps less of theatre in the popular sense and more the metaphysical concept of *Theatrum Mundi*: the world as a theatre and its inhabitants as players. My work has never really been about nature, but rather revolves around the consideration of ideas about nature. So this exhibition explores aspects of the social construction of nature from a number of positions: that of science (the realm of truth), hunters (the realm of domination and death), surrealists (who find the uncanny embodied in nature), and early curiosity collectors (who search nature for the blueprints of God himself). One of the ways we tell stories about nature is through objects. I have always been fascinated with natural history museums and how they construct what gets to be called "nature" at a particular time for a distinct group of people. In a sense it is not terribly different from the mission of a sculptor.

HJ: The work *Hunting Blinds* (2008) portrays certain archetypes—the glutton, dandy, librarian—by the objects they surround themselves with. These seem superficially to be nineteenth century character types: what is their significance to our present day?

MD: I do not see my hunter characters as nineteenth century types. The blinds or hides are period pieces in a sense, but firmly 20th century types and each can be found today—the person hunting for culinary reasons is on the rise in some cultures. The armchair hunter supports an entire industry of magazines and television channels in the U.S.A. The dandy hunter who sees hunting as part of the continuity of class privilege is (sadly) alive and well. The slob hunter expressing his virility in some pleasing expression of Thanatos can be found at almost every roadhouse during hunting season from Florida to Maine. I am often drawn to figures from the nineteenth century, the period when the biological sciences experienced their revolution. Many of the breakthroughs in the natural sciences—but also the missteps and prejudices—formed in the nineteenth century and continue to impact us.

HJ: Since your *Extinction* series in the late 1980s there's been a fluctuation of interest in environmental issues. When you see a wave of public engagement, can you think "ah great! Job done." Do you see your work as having an achievable 'purpose' in that way?

MD: In the art community the importance of environmentally concerned works ebbs and rises: I have witnessed the occasional flare of interest in artists dealing with ecological concerns, only to see it quickly disappear. I think art is often considered a cosmopolitan practice, and the politics and political concerns of the urban arena dominate. There seems to be a hierarchy of political issues in art, and ecology is somewhere near the bottom. That perspective is very much one of a New York based artist. I am delighted in the popular interest in issues of ocean health and plastic waste, even if I know that it may not stay there long. To build a progressive culture of nature one needs contributions from an array of professions, disciplines, and perspectives. Art is one of the places where a significant contribution can be made, but art is not often the best platform for organizing and cheerleading. An important aspect of art is to be an irritant, a skeptical voice. Those are needed as well. When I think of what artists can do for the environmental movement, I think about the diversity of expressions and methodologies that work remarkably well together. Artists working with engineers to find real world solutions, artists who make beautiful images of nature to help foster kinship, artists who have activist practices, artists like myself, who deal with the history of ideas and things, are all working toward this progressive culture of nature using very different tool kits. These strategies should not be imagined as competing but supportive of each other.

HJ: This exhibition shows works dating back to the 1990s, and suggests consistency both in terms of the modes of display that interest you (Wunderkammer, archive, museum) and the subject matter. How do you see the evolution in your work?

MD: My interest in nature and the biodiversity crisis is what led me to thinking about museums. This in turn took me back to the history of museums and the Wunderkammer. The categorization of nature, and the disciplining of its study in the Enlightenment are rungs on the ladder that lead to our suicidal relationship to the natural world. So I wanted to search how nature was sorted, discussed, and displayed before the Enlightenment, which leads to the fantastical cosmological cabinets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. When I follow the evolution of my work it clearly develops from a practice that was information based, quite didactic and polemical. Early on, I was convinced that the environment crisis was an information crisis. If people only knew about the impending ecological catastrophes they would demand action. Clearly I underestimated the nature of the problem. There is no crisis in information: there is a crisis of will. While the early work has quite a lot of zeal and advocacy, the recent work is increasingly melancholic and pessimistic. I understand mourning to be an aspect of my practice now. This is the second large survey of my work in the past few months (the other was at the ICA Boston) and there is also a new book of writings since the 1980s. This is frankly not easy for me. It is an emotionally challenging endeavor to look back over the past thirty years at a world that has changed so much and so harshly for the things I love: oceans, tropical forests, corals, biodiversity. There is little good news, particularly from my home country, which has a government obsessed with rolling back every environmental gain.

Mark Dion, The Wonder Workshop (detail), 2015, Future Histories: Mark Dion and Arseny Zhilyaev installation view at Casa dei Tre Oci, Venice, 2015. Courtesy: V-A-C Foundation, Moscow