CURiosity

art and the pleasure of knowing
CURIOSITY, AS BRIAN DILLON notes in his introductory essay to the exhibition of the same title, has oscillated between sin and virtue across the years. Francis Bacon, writing in the 16th century, railed against the portrayal of curiosity by church authorities, who had equated it with “the original temptation and sinne” that “hath in it somewhat of the serpent, and therefore where it entreth into a man, it makes him swell.” At that time, learning was seen to be the fruitless pursuit of vanity, something that would feed anxiety and atheism and fritter away a person’s abilities and virtue. Taking this transgressive history as a starting point, the exhibition “Curiosity: Art and the Pleasures of Knowing,” conceived by Dillon—a Modern Painters contributor and U.K. editor of Cabinet magazine—traces the revival of curiosity, from the Wunderkammer through Victorian museum displays, and the critical and witty probing of contemporary artists. Together with a curatorial team consisting of Roger Malbert and myself from the Hayward Gallery, in London, and Lauren Wright of Turner Contemporary, more than 175 items have been assembled from historic collections and artists’ studios: each maker or collector intent on transgressing intellectual fields and furthering a sensibility centered on the pursuit of knowledge. But rather than offering a teleological sweep through the centuries, the show, which runs between May 25 and September 15 at Turner Contemporary, in Margate, is about unlikely meetings.

The Horniman Museum’s huge over-stuffed walrus shares a space with Robert Hooke’s giant drawing of a flea. Early algae cyanotypes (essentially photographs made from cyanide) by Anna Atkins are shown alongside the uncomfortably disarming photographs of Czech outsider artist Miroslav Tichý, who created voyeuristic images of women in his town of Kyjov by surreptitiously snapping on a homemade camera fashioned from old bits of cardboard. The works frequently step across a green zone between art and science. Some are suffused with fetishism, others probe the natural world, while still others bring to light taxonomies latent within contemporary society. All share a thirst to gather, record, and question things that instinctively raise an eyebrow or somehow suggest lifting the lid on something else.

Curiosity is a broad term. If we are not curious, then what are we? The following seven works and artifacts from the exhibition have been chosen to convey a sense of the historical vectors that run through the show and to point to the fictions, scrutiny, and lines of speculation practiced by artists today.
THE CENTER FOR LAND USE INTERPRETATION

Los Alamos Rolodexes

The Center for Land Use Interpretation describes itself as a “research and education organization interested in understanding the nature and extent of human interaction with the earth’s surface.” Since its founding in 1994 in Los Angeles, the center has amassed a vast archive of images, data, and source materials, which they use to interpret the human imprint on the landscape as a “cultural inscription”—evidence to be read, decoded, and understood. Drawing on the legacies of land art, as well as the aesthetics of bureaucracy, they undertake exhibitions, conduct tours and field trips, and share the information they gather through their website and archive.

For this exhibition, they present a series of Rolodexes from a Los Alamos lab containing business cards from suppliers and company representatives of the sort that a national nuclear weapons lab might need to call on. Recently acquired from the archive of nuclear-worker-turned-activist Ed Grothus, they date from the height of the Cold War arms race.

Grothus worked as a machinist and then technician for 20 years but resigned in 1969 to operate a salvage company and thrift store, the Los Alamos Sales Co., better known as the “Black Hole.” Its object was to recycle nuclear industry cast-offs, putting them to use as agents of peace. “There is something poignant and compelling about the simplicity and directness of these business calling cards,” explains Matt Coolidge, the founder of the Center for Land Use Interpretation. “It comes down to people, with phone numbers. And it’s a snapshot of synergies between the business community and America’s atomic might, demand and supply. On one hand, it’s an indexical connection directly to the sources of building and operating the most sophisticated and powerful national defense technologies in the world. On the other hand, it is obsolete information, expired, a relic. It is rare, hard evidence of the links of the secret technological history of the nation, and also a dead end.”
The famous overstuffed walrus of the Horniman Museum, in South London, was purchased by that museum’s founder, Frederick Horniman, in the 1890s. Having never before seen such an unlikely beast as a walrus, the Victorian taxidermists (like practically everyone else in Britain) were not aware of its characteristic folds of skin and instead continued to simply stuff and stuff the animal until it was fully and proudly inflated, as it now appears. It shares this aspect of mistaken identity and extrapolation about the unknown and exotic in nature with Albrecht Dürer’s famous 1515 woodcut of a rhinoceros, also on view in “Curiosity.”

Brought to London by the hunter James Henry Hubbard (who had hauled it from Hudson Bay in Canada), the walrus was first exhibited in the Canadian section of the Indian and Colonial Exhibition of 1896 in South Kensington. Horniman, the son of a wealthy tea trader, had set about collecting objects of natural history, art, and culture from around the world and later presented his cache to the public in the spirit of Victorian philanthropy and public education. He first opened his home to the public, dividing the exhibits into two categories: art and nature. After accommodating more than 40,000 visits in the first months, Horniman decided to construct the museum that exists today.

This exhibition marks the first time since the walrus’s purchase that it will leave the museum. The moving operation will take three days, as it needs to be delicately hoisted over a fortress of specially built vintage vitrines and into a bespoke traveling crate. Some years ago, a local schoolboy thrust a pencil into the animal’s leathery hide, providing the museum a chance to see what was inside (various bits of wadding, cardboard, and things that were lying about at the time). This represents a second and more managed opportunity for museum staff to take a look behind the smoothed-out folds, X-ray the animal, and discover if, behind the tusks, a skull remains buried.
John Dee’s mirror and crystal

Dee (1527–1609) was a mathematician, astronomer, and occultist who served as an adviser to Queen Elizabeth I and became renowned as one of the most learned men of his day. Alongside his work as a mathematician—in his early 20s he lectured on advanced algebra at the Sorbonne—John Dee was a practitioner of magic, astrology, and Hermetic philosophy, and was said to have had the largest library in Britain at the time. For Dee, the two strands of science and occultism were closely bound in the search for a transcendent understanding of what he called “pure verities”—divine forms that he believed underlay the visible world.

Writers and others then and since have remained fascinated by Dee. Shakespeare is said to have modeled Prospero in *The Tempest* on him, while 007—his code name in correspondence with Elizabeth I—was famously adopted by Ian Fleming for James Bond. More recently, Dee has figured in the writing of H.P. Lovecraft and appeared as the main protagonist in Peter Ackroyd’s novel *The House of Doctor Dee*, 1993. The rock bands Blue Oyster Cult and Iron Maiden have referred to Dee in songs and Blur’s Damon Albarn penned an opera about him.

Dee is reputed to have used a black mirror and a crystal in his practice of scrying, whereby he predicted the future by looking at the glass and reflective surface for symbols or the “ghosts” of people. He claimed that the angel Uriel gave him the crystal, or “shew-stone,” in November 1582 and told him how to make the philosopher’s stone. The crystal, which he also used for healing, was later passed on to his son, who in turn gave it to Nicholas Culpeper as compensation for having cured a liver illness. A physician and alchemist, Culpeper attempted to incorporate the crystal into his medical practice until 1651, when he recorded that a demonic ghost burst out from it and “exercised itself to lewdness and other depravity with women and girls.”
The animal vomited by Mr. Lund, the baker

This small etching and accompanying text describe an incident from 1681/82, when Mr. Lund, a baker from York, "vomited a thing exactly of this shape and bigness." The incident was described in detail in a letter sent by York physician Martin Lister, who declared, "What this creature is, I dare scarce venture ... for that it is not like anything I ever yet saw in Nature." He also noted that "when new vomited it was speckled like a toad," and after being preserved in wine the matter turned to a "fleshy colour like unto raw veal."

Lister sent his findings to Robert Hooke—famous for his enlarged engraving of a flea (in Micrographia, 1665, also in the exhibition)—who included an account and accompanying plate in his Philosophical Collections, a publication of the Royal Society, the following year.

The event prompted a fair degree of consternation and debate among the scientific community of the day. While Lund, the poor unfortunate victim, thought that the animal was a witch or evil spirit, scientists contended that he must have swallowed a frog or toad embryo, which grew in the stomach, finally gestating into the unlikely shape, or perhaps it was even the compound of a number of pond creatures. The incident and accompanying etching were enough to catch the attention of Hans Sloane, president of the Royal Society, who subsumed it into his vast collection, which eventually formed the basis of the British Museum. The incident alludes to a moment when science and medicine augmented new belief systems but still were in relative infancy; it was a time when earnest reason collided with popular mysticism.
Words and Years

Adopting empirical strategies to visualize natural and man-made systems and phenomena, Johannessen’s practice operates in a space between social science and art, between concept and credence. With the series “Words and Years,” 2010–12, Johannessen has charted the frequency with which certain resonant and contentious words, such as love, crisis, hope, and reality are used in publications like Time magazine or National Geographic, raising intriguing and often humorous links between the diverse lists. Hinting at secret cycles or unseen trends at work within society, the artist draws out poetic correlations between the natural and the economic through the editorial tendencies in magazine print.

The graphs are frequently lyrical, or tongue-in-cheek, such as his bar chart of mentions of hope and reality in the journal Political Science or the pie chart of greed and desire in Genetics.

The viewer is drawn into the narratives that the graphs point to. For instance, studying how often the word crisis appears in the journals Nature and Science, one observes how the political climate at any given time seems to mirror the natural one. Yet it appears that the instances of miracles cited in the same magazines over the same period, remain at a low level throughout. So crises were common and miracles slight? Trawling back through periodicals since their inception and plotting their trends in this way, Johannessen establishes a mode of inquiry whereby fact merges with concept, offering clarity and haze simultaneously.

The New Mineral

The installations of Canell are “live.” Frequently, a stream of electricity will flow visibly through them, seen in the wobbling light of a delicately placed neon or the movement of a fan or sensor. As the critic Dieter Roelstraete has suggested, Canell is interested in “the alignment of electricity and female agency.” Electricity flows from the male to the female connector, and its history recalls the treatment for female hysteria, as well as the panoply of domestic appliances associated with the traditional image of the housewife. Electricity carries a hidden charge, an unseen power.

Canell’s works often show a sense that something is happening, albeit on a slow, almost imperceptible scale, for instance, a cloud of water particles that gradually turns a packet of concrete powder into hard concrete. If not experiments as such, her works are charged with a mental probing that is activated in the materials that comprise them. Yet behind the fragile low-key amalgam of slowly moving components, complex narratives are buried, enriching to those who probe.

The New Mineral shows a cluster of glass bulbs on broomstick handles. In the center, a light source feeds an assembled group of radiometers. The luminosity of this central light source slowly fades and brightens, prompting the radiometers, placed in similar glass bulbs atop the surrounding poles, to react accordingly, gathering speed relative to their given position and distance to the light source. Their mechanisms spin faster when the light is brighter and slow down when it’s darker.

The work feeds on the legacy of William Crookes, the chemist and spiritualist who invented the radiometer. Crookes started out as a meteorologist; his interests soon took him into economics, publishing, chemistry, and psychic research. Crookes was a well-known personality in the late 19th century, famous for discovering thallium and isolating the first known sample of helium. Inventor of the cathode ray tube, he believed that he had discovered a fourth state of matter, what he called “radiant matter,” which formed a bridge between his scientific and spiritualist beliefs. Radiant matter is the throbbing crux of The New Mineral, as it gently, perhaps ironically, beckons viewers to discover this ethereal notion for themselves.
his suite of five images shows the unexpected and intriguing sight of popes and cardinals gazing at the night sky through giant telescopes. Each witty, fascinating, and surprising, the images were garnered from the Vatican archives during a residency there by Grasso. Who would have suspected that the papacy, with its history of persecuting those who questioned the heavens, would have had such a sophisticated observatory, updated through the ages with the latest telescopes? Grasso reinforces this dissimilitude by showing alongside the images a page from Galileo’s 1610 treatise Sidereus Nuncius (sometimes translated as Starry Messenger) depicting his observations of the stars. He was later sentenced as a heretic and placed under house arrest by his former supporter, Pope Urban VIII.

It is unclear what these images were for and if they were intended to be anything other than private records. Grasso carefully researched the printing method, using a vintage silver plate technique to blur their historical status. A similar historical mist encircles his closely related series of paintings, “Studies into the Past,” 2010–12 (also on display in the exhibition), for which Grasso engaged Old Master restorers to help create paintings in a Renaissance style. Using composite scenes from earlier works, Grasso introduces spectacular natural phenomena into the landscape, such as a comet or a large swarm of bats. The effect creates a disturbance, a “what if” reinterpretation of history, in which extraordinary things of contemporary familiarity and understanding have been edited back into the past. These things could have happened, but would people have been so shocked that they ignored them? Grasso confronts the past with natural events so vivid and strange that if they had happened they could easily have been dismissed as dream apparitions or signs from above and buried for centuries in a distant collective memory. How curious can we really be without taking a leap of faith outside the known borders of our belief? MP