





THE  
UNNATURAL  
HISTORY  
MUSEUM





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MUSEUM



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# INTRODUCTION



# THE MARVELLOUS IS ALWAYS BEAUTIFUL

*The marvellous is always beautiful, anything marvellous is beautiful, in fact only the marvellous is beautiful.*

**André Breton, *The Surrealist Manifesto***

*Curiosity is a vice that has been stigmatized in turn by Christianity, by philosophy, and even by a certain conception of science. Curiosity, futility. The word, however, pleases me.*

**Michel Foucault, 'The Masked Philosopher'**

*The imagination is the spur of delights ... all depends upon it, it is the mainspring of everything; now, is it not by means of the imagination one knows joy? Is it not of the imagination that the sharpest pleasures arise?*

**Marquis de Sade**

*My museum is entered down a narrow spiral staircase, painted gold. Originally, visitors had to squeeze through a wardrobe full of old fur coats to get to the staircase – but after a few months I got fed up with squeezing through and decided that it was a little bit affected.*



# I WOULD LIKE TO INVITE YOU TO LOOK INSIDE MY MIND

Originally I had intended to present you with a beautiful cross-section, surgically cut with a razor blade. But I'm very much afraid that this is not my style and is beyond my modest capabilities. Instead I have removed my mind, bashed it flat with a sledgehammer and then picked out bits that sparkled, caught my eye and I felt like sharing with you. I have not attempted to focus on any part of my mind; rather, I am presenting lots of little bits. The glue is that I am interested in and gain pleasure from them all. Some bits are odder than others and fill me with delight.

Museums are instruments for the telling of stories and for considering, commenting on and enjoying the *condition humaine* in exactly the same way as novels, pictures, operas, films and other creative endeavours. To me, the objects in my museum in East London are my words, tubes of paint, graphite pencil tips, bassoons, oboes, flutes or violins. Museums tell different stories at different times to different people. Today, this is my museum telling my story to you.

Cats may have seven lives but I suspect we can all do better than that, with multiple lives and personalities on show to different people at different times. But I know nothing about you, so here I'm going to be talking about me. I aspire to spend at least one-third of my life asleep, at least one-third of my life alone and hopefully less than one-third of my life interacting with other people – the last of these is what I think is known as Real Life, though I am not sure. I have always felt that 'life' is something that happens to other people. Until I reached middle age, I assumed that this was something that would start happening to me, that it was just around the corner: I needed to finish high school, get some real friends. Then, I felt it was something that happened after university, or that it would start in my thirties, but in my forties I decided it was simply not for me.

Being comfortable with loneliness and misery is, I think, a secret of contentment. There may be some of you out there who spend every waking moment interacting with people, either in person or electronically – even when on the loo – but you will not be reading this book, so I can safely ignore you. To my mind you are an unimaginably strange creature, far more exotic and unknowable than anything I have written about here. Even you will spend up to a third of your life asleep in a world that functions differently, but is no less real, no less rule-bound – albeit with different rules – than your waking life.

In this book, as in my life, I try to be as little concerned as possible with Real Life. Hark – I do not dismiss Real Life's importance; it has its own compartment. But I have no truck with those who are not interested in the unexplained, who dismiss dreams. The only problem I have with them is their





◀ *The entrance to the second chamber of my Wunderkabinett is lined with spirit drawings by Madge Gill, Hugo Wilson's portrait of a shrunken head and a Tessa Farmer photograph. Inside the chamber is displayed much of my entomological collection, a giant Japanese spider crab, a giant anteater's skeleton, dead babies in bottles, Congolese carvings, an elephant bird egg, pinniped skulls, Old Master etchings, fossils, Stone Age tools and over 1,000 other items.*



problem with me. They want to dismiss the more than two-thirds of my life I spend without them.

I want to make a clarion call for this two-thirds to have its voice. This book is, I hope, at least in part, a continuation of my quest for the hidden two-thirds of my life to meet and interact with your hidden two-thirds. Wish me luck. Don't worry, I don't dismiss your science, economics, warfare, police, prisons, taxes, medicines, technology and all that jazz. I don't doubt their importance; they have their place and that is in their own Real World. This book, and as much of my life as possible, exists elsewhere. Goodbye.

I want to live in a Neoplatonic world, a world of mystery and other beings, of many gods and spirits. With Swedenborg I want to walk with the angels, but I also want to fly with the witches, dance and make merry with Irish fairies – the Good People. I want to live with ghosts, to see gnomes in the woods, centaurs on the hills. I do not want to live in this world; I do not wish to be defined by who I am, what I have and what I do. I do not want to live in a world where people know everything there is to know, and explain everything there is to explain. I do not want there to be any experts who can tell me where I am wrong. I want to live in a world of darkness, pinpricked by light, by gleaming jewels. I want to be in love. I want to look at a plant and see the plant, not its Latin name, its evolutionary history, what it looks like chopped up under a microscope. With Tom McCarthy I want to let the orange orange. Naming, it is true, often calls, but it can also kill. Where is the charm in a laboratory? It is like looking for joy in pornography.

Since the time of the Renaissance, motivated by curiosity and by desire for knowledge, social prestige and economic gain, people have built up collections made of natural specimens and manmade rarities displayed together and known as cabinets of curiosity. To me, the Age of Enlightenment was the beginning of the end. European philosophers challenged superstition and injustice by arguing for the use of reason, scientific experimentation, invention and discovery. New ideas, animals, plants, artefacts and peoples flooded in from voyages

of exploration, bringing in new systems of classification and new subjects such as geology and archaeology. Collections were no longer organized on purely aesthetic grounds, but intended to advance the tendentious arguments of the scientific fashions of the day.

People continued to collect natural history, art, antiquities, books, coins – but now, they were interested in 'knowledge'. Out of these collections were born the first great museums, with the British (as is their custom) leading the way with the first national museum – the British Museum – in 1753.

I opened my museum – the Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities, Fine Art & UnNatural History – in Hackney, East London, 256 years later, and I built it there for two reasons: firstly because that was where I lived, and secondly because that was the cheapest place to do it – which leads back to the first reason. When I first went to Hackney in the early noughties after returning from four years in the States, I thought it was the back end of nowhere. An invitation to dinner came with an invitation to stay the night; it didn't feel like London; it was miles from the nearest Tube station. I moved there because I was an artist with very little money and wanting a large amount of space. Hackney is now one of London's smartest, most desirable and most expensive neighbourhoods but back then it was horrible, with one of the greatest concentrations of urban poverty anywhere in Europe. The parks were unfriendly, filled with drug users, mopeds and pit bulls. If you went out late at night and weren't mugged, someone else at the party probably would be. I don't think I loved it, but it was home.

What it is that I have built and why I have built it remains something of a mystery to me. That it continues to lurch from one crisis to another but stays open and has received over 150,000 visitors is some sort of minor miracle. Like a garden, it is an ongoing project that evolves and leads itself in different directions. As someone who has often been profoundly unhappy and dissatisfied, both with myself and the world around me, I had to do something to distract myself from the misery of being me.



*The Sarcophagus Chamber, with a nineteenth-century female human skeleton behind glass in the centre of its table, is my homage to Sir John Soane's Museum, complete with an etching from William Hogarth's A Rake's Progress. It is dominated by a merman and the skeleton of Mortimer, Glasgow Zoo's famous lion. The walls display my unscientific survey of the love lives of different nations. Originally this room was rented out for intimate moments, until a particularly enthusiastic couple managed to break the glass of the sarcophagus and had to go to hospital. Nowadays, I rent it out mainly for dinners and boardroom meetings.*

When I first started at art school, a friend's mother looked at me with glowing eyes and said, 'Only artists can change the world.' I didn't believe her then and I don't believe her now, but I do believe that I am able to change my world. And, not liking or fitting into the world outside, I have set out to create my own world. I don't think it is a world that I will be happy in, but it is a world that I will perhaps understand and be able, to some degree, to control.

I have spent a lot of time in museums, much of it complaining and moaning about them. I don't like how they are set out, I don't like their displays and I don't like their modernizations. They have been captured in the main by narrow-minded academic cliques who bring an entirely artificial manmade construct, the metanarrative, to the museum. They wish to tell the audience something, to educate us in their beliefs. And they are their beliefs – every generation repurposes museums to tell the latest story. Most art museums used to be dedicated almost exclusively to painted pictures or sculpted stone by dead white male artists. Now, they are being modified to reflect the surprisingly recent discovery that art can be made by peoples of all sexes and ethnicities out of any material known to man. Museums that enthralled generations of children with dead animals in cases have been reborn as playgrounds complete with interactive flashing lights and moving plastic dinosaurs.

My unease goes deeper than that. I am profoundly unhappy with the Enlightenment ideology that, to understand the world, you divide it into a million different disciplines so that there are museums dedicated to all sorts of dead ends: dead animals, arms and armour, mid-twentieth-century furniture, old pictures, new pictures, twentieth-century pictures, early twentieth-century pictures on paper done in Italy, science, gas, minerals,

steam engines, toy soldiers, seashells, automobiles, African art, tribal art, ceramics, magic, medicine, erotica, criminalia, living things, dead things, fish, monkeys, lawn-mowers, aeroplanes, war, boats (or a specific boat) ... well, this list could easily fill several books. But what I longed for was a museum that would bring everything under the sun that interested me into one place. I loved New York's Metropolitan Museum, with its extensive collections in many different fields – but it wasn't mine, and I couldn't see any way of making it mine. Besides, it too is governed by bizarre criteria: everything in it is rare and beautiful, not to mention manmade and expensive.

I wanted a museum that was mine. Not exclusively about me, but filled with everything that I liked: my magpie's nest. I wanted to build the sort of museum that the Tradescants would have built today. I wanted to create my own world, and that's what I've done. Part of it is perhaps a self-portrait, inasmuch as any work by any artist or writer is primarily about themselves (biographies I find a particularly interesting discipline, rarely telling one more than the bare facts about their supposed subject, but telling one far more about the author and their personality – or even lack thereof). But more than that, it is a portrait of the world; the world inside my head.

**Viktor Wynd**  
**The Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities,**  
**Fine Art & UnNatural History, London**  
**January 2020**





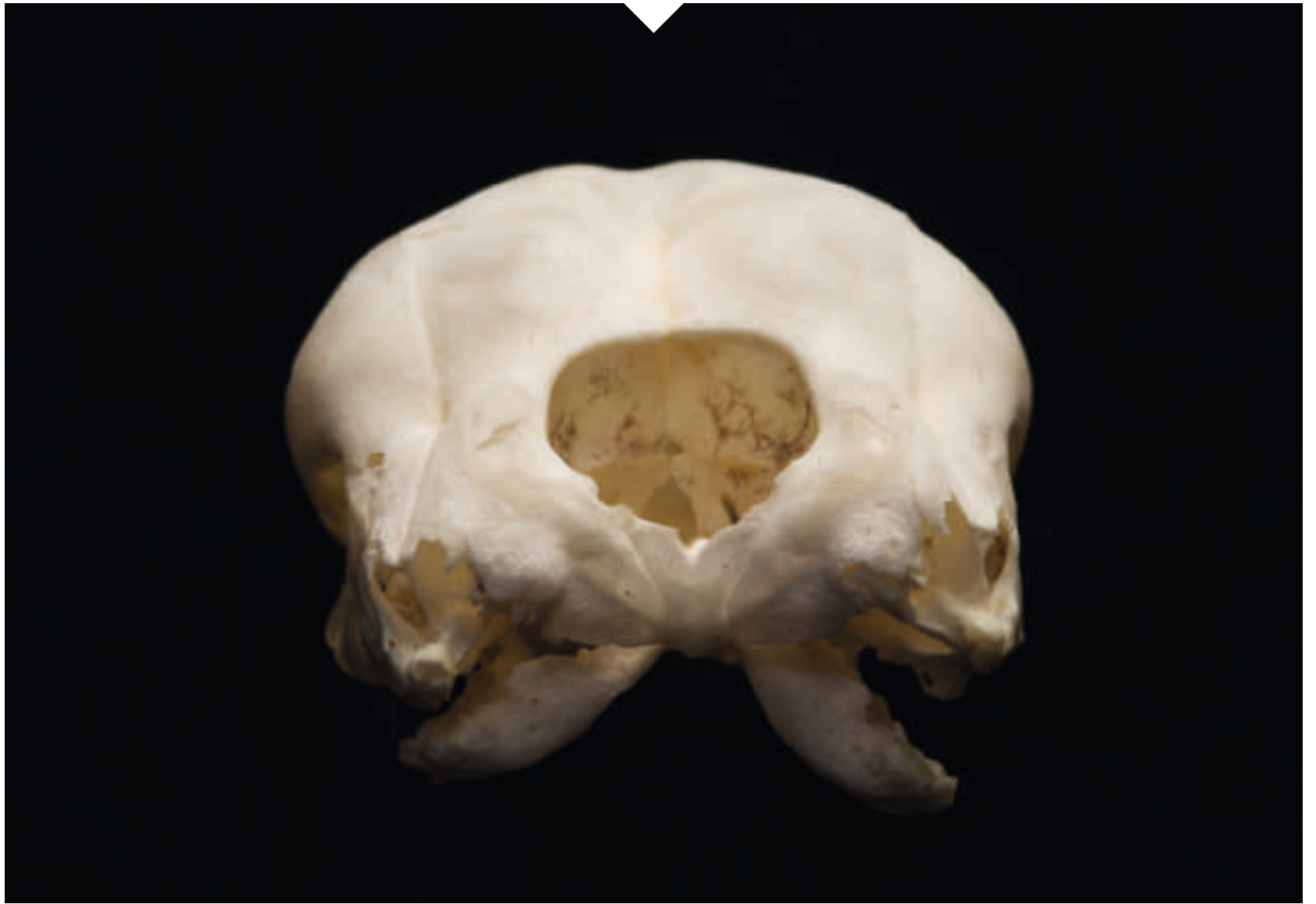


# MONSTERS AND MYTHICAL BEASTS



*The existence of the spiritual, non-corporeal beings that Sacred Scripture usually calls 'angels' is a truth of faith. The witness of Scripture is as clear as the unanimity of Tradition.*

**Roman Catholic Catechism**



# FREAKS



*The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass available.*

**Theodor Adorno**

We are freaks, you and I. In times past we might have been hounded out of our villages, dunked in ponds and burned as witches. But at least we (and here I mean me, because I do not know this about you and you may correct me if I am wrong, but at least we, I mean I) have our full (I hesitate to say normal, because I'm never really sure what normal means) complement of limbs and heads.

I have a small collection – growing very slowly – of real, 100 per cent genuine monsters: creatures born with more than one head and more than the normal number of limbs. At the last count I had a lamb with eight legs, another with two heads, a mummified kitten with two faces, the skeleton of a two-headed kitten, a two-headed snake, a two-headed calf, a four-legged chicken, a three-legged chicken, a two-headed baby skeleton, a baby skeleton with four legs and four arms but one head, Siamese piglets, a

piglet born without a face and a piglet with one eye in the middle of its forehead. This is not enough, but it will do for today. Most natural history and medical museums have far larger and superior collections of monsters and freaks than mine, but very few put any of them on display as they seek to discourage prurient interest (something I myself have always gone out of my way to encourage).

Such freaks are truly unusual. In happier times when magic and superstition ruled the world, they were seen as something more than mere scientific anomalies – they were considered portents, communications from the Other World (and not normally positive ones). These days farms are enormous, and one defective birth does not matter. But if you had only one cow and it gave birth to one calf a year, and that calf was defective, it might mean no milk for breakfast.



◀ **Top: two-headed kitten skull;**  
**bottom: eight-legged lamb;**  
**mummified two-headed kitten.**

