

Adrienne Klein

A distinction must be made in landscape painting, as in every other branch of art, between the elements generated by the more limited field of contemplation and direct observation, and those which spring from the force of idealizing mental power.¹

If Alexander von Humboldt valued this latter form of artistic response, he would certainly be gratified by the work of contemporary artists who: draw inspiration from his research, transcend mere observation and reporting, and give us new ways of seeing. Artists who apply Humboldt's "idealizing mental power" to Humboldtian subject matter include Rachel Berwick, Mark Dion, Daniel Velasco and Jose Restrepo. These artists directly reference Humboldt's two-century old work.

The work I will show is unified by two factors: one, Humboldt is central to the content of the work and two; all of the work can be termed installation art. Installation art encompasses work ranging from tableaux to new media art to work that is site-specific, that is, influenced by the history or dimensions or other characteristics of the gallery that contains it.

Daniel Velasco-Schwarzenberger

Daniel Velasco created an installation that consists of projections of images and quadraphonic sound in a performance lasting 65 minutes. Visitors move through fields of sounds and view imagery from the natural environment of Cuba, where Velasco followed the path of Humboldt's travels. Velasco makes

1. Alexander von Humboldt, in Hanno Beck, ed., *Kosmos. Entwurf einer physikalischen Weltbeschreibung, Studienausgabe*, Vol. 12 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993 [1832]) p. 95; as cited in Daniel Velasco, "Island Landscape: Following in Humboldt's Footsteps through Acoustic Spaces of the Tropics," *Leonardo Music Journal*, Vol. 10, 2000, pp. 21-24.

two points: first, that Humboldt is the most appropriate subject of this display because of Humboldt's appreciation of the natural world and progressive views on the value of the cultures he encountered.

FIGURE 13-1. Daniel Velasco-Schwarzenberger, "Island Landscape," 1999



His second point is his own advocacy of the nascent field of "acoustic ecology, sensitizing (listeners) to environmental sounds and the need for their preservation."² Velasco claims Humboldt as a forerunner of acoustic ecology because "his way of thinking is influenced by his sense of listening."³

Humboldt wrote in great, descriptive detail about the sound of water, volcanoes and animals. Among the phenomena he observed was the apparent magnification of sound at night, the so-called "Humboldt Effect." (A short segment of Velasco's audio work is played, consisting of field recordings from Cuba and a text by Humboldt read by an actor).⁴

Mark Dion

Since the 1980s, Mark Dion has produced artwork that focuses on science and its place in culture. His installations examine how the subjective understanding of nature becomes established as fact and critique Western systems of classification. Dion's work often focuses on early naturalists, such as Baron Georges Cuvier, Alfred Russel Wallace and Alexander von Humboldt.

2. Daniel Velasco, "Island Landscape: Following in Humboldt's Footsteps through Acoustic Spaces of the Tropics," *Leonardo Music Journal*, Vol. 10, 2000, pp. 21-24.

3. *Ibid.*

4. A brief audio extract of Daniel Velasco's piece "Island Landscape" can be heard at <http://members.mcnon.com/zgue/artists/velascoeng.html>

This is an example of one of many simulations of “wunderkammern” that Dion has made. Wunderkammern, or Cabinets of Curiosity were personal collections, precursors to museums, which were popular in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. Francis Bacon recommended:

FIGURE 13-2. Mark Dion, “Cabinet of Curiosity,” The Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, 1997.



... a goodly, huge cabinet, wherein whatsoever the hand of man by exquisite art or engine has made rare in stuff, form or motion; whatsoever singularity, chance, and the shuffle of things hath produced; whatsoever Nature has wrought in things that want life and may be kept; shall be sorted and included.⁵

Dion, in his typical practice, borrowed for this piece from the collections of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and the Carnegie Museum of Art. His borrowed materials were, at once, both authentic museum objects and re-contextualized as props in a fictive tableau. This piece was, in part, a performance. He trained staff to conduct a search for insect specimens in the museum just as a naturalist might in a field site. The installation is an artifact of the performance. The manikin wears the uniform of a naturalist in the tropics. Behind are photographs made from the insects that were found and preserved.

Dion assembled a tableau that pictures Wallace’s field practice. We see a hammock with mosquito netting and, on a crate serving as a side table, a

5. Francis Bacon, cited in Fulton H. Anderson, *Francis Bacon, His Career and Thought*, USC Press, Los Angeles, 1962.

copy of Malthus' book "Principles of Population" sitting beside an unfinished letter to Darwin. There is audible a sound recording of what sounds to be malaria-induced ramblings by the naturalist.

FIGURE 13-3. Mark Dion, installation in the Carnegie International exhibition, Pittsburgh, PA, 1999



FIGURE 13-4. Mark Dion, installation in the Carnegie International exhibition, Pittsburgh, PA, 1999.



This piece was part of an exhibition in Cologne, Germany, that Dion titled "Alexander von Humboldt and Other Sculptures." The installation included books on and by Humboldt, plants Humboldt described and, in the large aquarium, ten live red piranhas. It is essentially a tribute to Humboldt.

These representative pieces, a wunderkammern and tableaux celebrating and parodying science practice, bring "together several of Dion's favorite binaries – the individual and the collective; art and science; imperialism and naturalism; nature and culture – in order to show how they are, in fact, inextricably linked."⁶

6. Review of Mark Dion exhibitions at American Fine Arts, New York and the Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, CT, Martha Schwendener, *ArtForum*, June 2003

FIGURE 13-5. Image 5: Mark Dion, “The Delirium of Alfred Russel Wallace,” 1994



FIGURE 13-6. Mark Dion, Alexander von Humboldt (Amazon Memorial), 2000



Jose Alejandro Restrepo

Restrepo's installations combine text, images and historical research. His work is a critique of misperceptions of Latin America from abroad, historically and to the present day.

“Humboldt's Crocodile is Not Hegel's,” is seen here installed in Montreal's Musée d'art contemporain in September 2004.

The installation consists of the title written large on the wall flanked by two video monitors. Near the floor, the wall is marked off in 1-foot incre-

ments to 25 feet in length, the length of an Amazonian crocodile. On the video monitor to the left is a tight shot of a crocodile's head. 25 feet to the right the monitor displays the tip of the crocodile's tail. On the wall are quotes from texts by Hegel and Humboldt.

FIGURE 13-7. Jose Alejandro Restrepo: "Humboldt's Crocodile is Not Hegel's," the Montreal's Musée d'art contemporain, September 2004.



FIGURE 13-8. Jose Alejandro Restrepo: "Humboldt's Crocodile is Not Hegel's," the Montreal's Musée d'art contemporain, September 2004.



As the title says, the contrast of the two Europeans' views of Latin America is the subject. Hegel never stepped foot in the Americas but felt authorized to express his opinion on its realities, projecting a view that native

American cultures as well as native American creatures were inferior. Humboldt, of course, could write from a first hand, empirical examination. Humboldt wrote a rebuttal to Hegel's view, citing the Amazonian crocodile as an example of a larger, superior species from the New World.

Rachel Berwick

Rachel Berwick's art focuses on extinction. "May-por-é" is an installation in which two Amazon parrots have been trained to speak an extinct South American language.

FIGURE 13-9. Rachel Berwick, "May-por-é," 1998-2004



Berwick relates that Alexander von Humboldt was traveling along the Orinoco River in what is now Venezuela when he happened upon a Carib Indian tribe. When he asked his hosts why their pet parrots were speaking a dialect different from their own language, the Indians told Humboldt that the birds had belonged to the Mayporé tribe, whom they had recently exterminated during tribal warfare. The birds were spoils of war. To Humboldt's amazement, the parrots were the last remaining speakers of the Mayporé language.

Humboldt's meticulously detailed journals don't corroborate Berwick's version of the legend of the parrots. They do, however, contain Mayporé words he heard on his travels, transcribed phonetically.

This was Rachel Berwick's response to the story: she designed a 10 foot in diameter aviary, covered in translucent polypropylene. The cylindrical aviary is lighted inside and shown in a gallery with subdued lighting so that the aviary shines from within like a lantern. Inside the aviary are two parrots and rainforest plants that provide perches for the birds. There is a tape recording

of the sound of flowing water. Because the walls are translucent, the viewer only sees shadowy, ghost-like silhouettes of the birds. And the birds speak. They pronounce the words of the Mayporé language, the only language they know. They appear as ghostly shadows that speak a ghost language.

FIGURE 13-10. Rachel Berwick, “May-por-é,” 1998-2004



Berwick was intrigued by the idea that parrots could be the sole and imperfect conduit through which an entire tribe’s existence could be traced. Working with Humboldt’s notes and with the collaborative efforts of a bird behaviorist, two linguists, and a sound engineer, she taught the parrots to ‘speak’ the Mayporé language. Berwick started this project in 1997. The installation has since appeared in London, New York, New Haven, Istanbul and Sao Paulo.

Berwick may have taken artistic license with the historic record. Humboldt, in his journal, reports on repeated contacts with the Mayporé so they were clearly not extinct at the time of his travels. Humboldt spends much time phonetically recording words in all of the languages of the area, for example: “The titi [a kind of monkey] of the Orinoco (*Simia sciurea*), well known in our collections, is called bititini by the Maypure Indians.”⁷

Humboldt does relate the story of a tribe called the Atures driven to extinction. Further, he tells the story of a surviving pet parrot who preserves the Ature language.

7. Alexander von Humboldt and Aime Bonpland, *Personal narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America During the Years 1799-1804*, v. 2. Translated and edited by Thomasina Ross. George Bell & Sons, 1907. Available online from The Project Gutenberg, http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/authrec?fk_authors=1995, Chapter 2-19, p. 180.

At the period of our voyage an old parrot was shown at Maypures, of which the inhabitants said, and the fact is worthy of observation, that they did not understand what it said, because it spoke the language of the Atures.⁸

Berwick may have conflated the stories of several tribes that Humboldt reported on. Her installation is, nevertheless, a beautiful evocation of these encounters.

Interestingly, language is a skill that separates humans (representing culture) from animals (representing nature), yet Berwick's parrots instruct us. It is this sort of appreciation of nature in all its diversity that we find so progressive and laudable in Humboldt.

Reviewing the four artists I have discussed:

Rachel Berwick takes a story told by Humboldt and seizes upon it as one that furthers her conviction that we must not neglect the impending extinction of species, languages and races. This is the thesis motivating her entire body of work and her success here is composing the Humboldt / May-por-é story – a particularly compelling story.

Similarly, Daniel Velasco wishes to focus our attention on natural environments that are at risk. He documents them and presents them to us in a sensory-rich, immersive environment. We may be transported by the images and sounds to another realm, but it is a vicarious, aestheticized version of the original, minus the hazards and heat. Velasco knows the limits of his ability to reproduce an environment, but seizes upon this method to enlist our interest or, better still, our activism.

Mark Dion honors Humboldt in his pantheon of enlightened scientist explorers. His tableaux about Humboldt are part of a body of work that names names: Charles Darwin, Rachel Carson, and Alexander Wilson among others. Dion extols the work done by these pioneers, but of equal importance to him is the examination of the subjective nature of museum display, summed up nicely by the title of his 1997 exhibition "Natural History and Other Fictions."

Jose Alejandro Restrepo lives in South America and examines the continuing relevance of the historic European regard for his continent. Like Berwick and Velasco, he has a message of advocacy and his art is a means to that end.

As David McCullough wrote about Humboldt,

"...he began to see what nobody had understood before him; that life's forms and their grouping with one another are conditioned by physical factors in their environment...he realized more fully that to classify and identify count

8. *Ibid*, Chapter 2-24, p. 391.

for little unless you understood how to relate such information to integrated natural processes.”⁹

Relating to natural processes, the integration of ideas, synthesis – all add up to original thinking that was Humboldt’s hallmark. It is no wonder that contemporary artists continue to draw inspiration from him.

9. David McCullough, *Brave Companions*, Simon & Schuster, 1992