

# Playing in the *Wunderkammer*

Carson & Miller

... our intuitive notion of truth in fiction is the notion of something that admits of degree. (Currie 91)



Figure 1: Installation view of *The Story of Things*.

*The Story of Things* (2009-10) began with a consideration of the discrete collections, and the manner in which they are organized, that sit beneath the roof of the Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections.<sup>1</sup> As a set of collections (including scrapbooks, works of art, Victorian ephemera, books, and film) that forms a single museum, Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections represents a set of narratives of collection (or collecting narratives), narratives that run concurrently, that exist side-by-side. In this article we will be considering our curatorial practice – as artists<sup>2</sup> Carson & Miller – in relation to our work with these collections, which resulted in the exhibition *The Story of Things* and the artists' book *Scrapbook (the story of things)*.<sup>3</sup> We deliberately set out to disrupt the linearity of the reading of each collection, transgressing their boundaries, and instead viewing them as one, a 'super'-collection of disparate matter whose accrual creates a series of relationships that exist uniquely (a phenomenon that underpins every collection: the private, the personal, the public). Our particular act of curation (in both the exhibition and the accompanying scrapbook) used the artifacts in this museum collection not in a traditional, "accepted" manner but as artists' materials that might be altered and played with. In so doing we presented misleading, misinterpreted, or inaccurate accounts of the museum's holdings, investigating Susan Pearce's idea that "collections are essentially a narrative of experience; as objects are a kind of material language, so the narratives in to which they can be selected and organized are a kind of fiction. . ." (412).

Our curatorial process took as its premise the cross-generic arrangements of the *Wunderkammer*,<sup>4</sup> displaying what we described in the introduction to the

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1 Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections is an accredited museum that is part of the Manchester Metropolitan University Library, and includes the following distinct collections: Victorian Ephemera, including the Sir Harry Page Collection of Scrapbooks, Albums & Commonplace Books; Manchester School of Art Collection; the Archive Collection; Book Design and Children's Book collections; and the North West Film Archive. Except for the North West Film Archive, all of these collections are housed in the Sir Kenneth Green Library, All Saints, Manchester. For more information, go to [www.specialcollections.mmu.ac.uk](http://www.specialcollections.mmu.ac.uk) and [www.nwfa.mmu.ac.uk](http://www.nwfa.mmu.ac.uk).

2 It is important for us to acknowledge that the work we discuss here utilizes the term "curator" in a manner distinct from the more commonly applied use of the term. We annex the term to our primary role as artists. Historically, the role of the curator has changed and developed substantially. See Burton's discussions of the term "curator," and its related terms, which establish its historical context and the traditional perception of the role and its purpose.

3 Published by Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections, 2009.

4 In his article, "A World of Signs: Baroque Pansemioticism, the Polyhistor and the Early Modern Wunderkammer", Jan C. Westerhoff identifies the Wunderkammer, or cabinet of wonder, as a "... seventeenth century phenomenon essentially connected with polyhistorism, namely that of the early modern polyhistorical collections..."(633).

exhibition as our “deliberately random and undisciplined journey.”<sup>5</sup> As we experienced the collections and archives, we made connections between the materials we found there, “relating things by type, sometimes throwing the unlikely together, sometimes remembering something [we] already knew, sometimes uncovering things unknown to [us].”<sup>6</sup> These strategies disregarded the conventional sense-making of the museum that categorizes or historicizes, and thus they leave behind the notion of the museum’s “grand narrative.” In *The Story of Things* and *Scrapbook (the story of things)* play was our method of making sense and of making believe. In this text we will focus on the significance of play throughout the curatorial, exhibiting, and publishing processes we undertook, investigating the *Wunderkammer*, or Cabinet of Curiosities, as our “field of play”<sup>7</sup> (Allmer and Sears v). There was a serious intellectual drive associated with the creation of a *Wunderkammer*, but play is present in a number of ways such as in the *Wunderkammer*’s mirroring of children’s collecting patterns and in its methods of display, of juxtaposing objects against one another. In the early part of the twentieth century the *Wunderkammer* became a vehicle by which to challenge what André Breton identified in the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) as “the reign of logic” (9). The restoration to visual culture of the *Wunderkammer* by the surrealists provided them with a device to “. . . search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices” (10). Breton’s own *Wunderkammer*, now preserved at the Pompidou Centre, is testament to this (but, of course, now enters the “grand narrative” of twentieth-century culture contributing to the sense-making which it could be said it was created to defy). The persistence of the surrealist’s use of the *Wunderkammer* is also evident in contemporary works such as Mark Dion’s book and installation *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy* (2005) which “seems to represent a crossover between an old curator’s office, a storage room and a . . . cabinet of curiosities” (Endt 1).

The following text is divided into three sections where we explore, from a practice-based perspective, the notion that the *Wunderkammer* opens up alternative, playful curatorial strategies that rely on the legacy of surrealism. In “Displaying Play” we reflect on the “systematical confusion and disorder” (Ernst 28) that underpinned our playing with the museum’s artifacts. We will take this

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Essentially, the *Wunderkammer* was a space, varied in its size and shape, which displayed the owner’s span of knowledge in multiple areas or disciplines.

<sup>5</sup> This extract is from the introductory text panel we prepared for visitors to the exhibition and is unpublished elsewhere.

<sup>6</sup> Also from the introductory text panel we prepared for visitors to the exhibition (unpublished elsewhere).

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Allmer and John Sears have written about our practice prior to the work we write about here and use the term “field of play” in connection to our game-playing. Here, we apply this principle to the project we are exploring.

principle into the second section of this text, "The *Wunderkammer* and the Unreliable Teller," where we will explore ways through which knowledge is "told" and examine how the instability of knowledge can provoke "an endless production of fortuitous encounters"<sup>8</sup> (Allmer iv). To draw together a conclusion, in our final section, "Wandering, Wondering, Marveling, Dreaming," we consider "wonder" in conjunction with both the principles of the *Wunderkammer* and with our strategies of play as a way of making sense. Wonder releases us from expected sense making, permitting us to roam, to wander, in any way we like: "Fear, the attraction of the unusual, chance, the taste for things extravagant are all devices which we can always call upon without fear of deception." (Breton 16).

## Displaying Play

Our collaborative practice has emerged from a shared interest in narrative and has been further developed through the fundamental principles of collaboration which, in this context, are interaction and exchange. Our method of collaborating with one another has always been playful and, as our practice has developed, play has become a central methodology in the production of our artwork. At its simplest this strategy has involved question and answer games, both as a way of producing an artifact (in the form of an artists' book or poster) and as a way of performing an artwork (which has seen us play games in the gallery). However, in the context of *The Story of Things*, our play took a different form, stepping off from Breton's notion of "objective chance" (Breton qtd. in Ernst 20). Here, selection and arrangement was our method of play which we related to the surrealist practices of collage and exquisite corpse.

While some of the arrangements we made were deliberately playful, they were not designed to undermine the selected materials, or indeed the collections from which they were drawn. This playfulness permitted a full range of responses from us as artists; much like children at play who use their transitional objects to explore their place in the world (Winnicott 2005), we were adults at play, making relationships and constructing fictions at will which were triggered by the "things" that were in our hands. Running through the production of the exhibition was a childlike, and childish, impulse to experience the artifacts, to touch them, and to feel the privilege of being permitted to do so, to access ordinarily restricted areas of the museum, and to revel in the child's delight of treading in adult territory. In this scenario, where adults play with "things" as children might, the museum's holdings were inevitably toy-like. As David Hopkins states:

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<sup>8</sup> This quotation is drawn from the essay *On Being Touched* by Patricia Allmer which she wrote to accompany *The Story of Things* and *Scrapbook (the story of things)*. This essay grew out of Allmer's observations of our working with the collections.

It becomes evident, then, that toys, as objects which have always inhabited an ambiguous zone vis-à-vis the reality principle, serve adults, as much as children, as means of expressing anxieties, yearnings, fantasies and so forth, and have direct relation to the artistic impulse. (Hopkins 12)

Playing together, and in this instance playing with objects, is significant here. While it is clear that we are individuals (Rosie Miller and Jonathan Carson) as we work together, nevertheless the collaborative process, for us, produces a third entity – Carson & Miller. Play is a means of exchange and interaction both between us and between the materials we handle. Early in the curatorial process, as we initially discovered the scope of the collections, we found ourselves in the familiar framework of early schooling which asks children to “show and tell.” In our case, the show and tell was not a literal narration of chosen objects but was a chance to navigate connections made between objects and ourselves, sometimes not reliably but always with sincerity and with a genuine desire to “wonder.” Therefore we align our collaborative practice itself with the surrealist practice of collage; our process, as much as our product, is an act of collage like that noted in Ernst’s observation: “When the thoughts of two or more authors were systematically fused into a single work (otherwise called collaboration) this fusion could be considered as akin to collage” (30). The influence of collage on our practice and our production is evident in both the exhibition and the scrapbook. Ernst asks “what is the most noble conquest of collage?” and responds “the irrational” (29). Furthermore he states: “. . . we have been surprised by the clarity of the irrational action . . .”: we identify with this “clarity” which offers a site between the binary of rational/irrational. This site provides a place where we can operate within a framework of sense that exists outside of the grand narrative, or what Breton identified as the “reign of logic” (9).



Figure 2: Detail of an exhibition cabinet from *The Story of Things*.

Numerous collages were constructed in the curation of the exhibition and the creation of *Scrapbook*. In figure 2, for example, an initial viewing of the artifacts displayed on the shelf of one of the exhibition cabinets might suggest a particular connection founded in an historic period. Reading the exhibition captions would confirm this; however, the “logic” which brought together this careful arrangement hinges not on the age of the artifacts but on their interrelationship. This is most pertinently illustrated in the forms of the model of a man on horseback, the figure of the geisha, and the plinth on which she sits, but which does not “belong” to her. This collage took shape as a result of our identification that the man on horseback was designed to stand on the plinth to enable his “correct” display (the model is a miniature of a Venetian monument). In our discovery that the model and plinth could be separated, or (in the language of collage) cut away from one another, the plinth became like a scrap and offered us an opportunity for it to be joined to another object, in this case, the figure of the geisha. The playful – indeed, misleading – positioning of the geisha on the plinth was not immediately apparent to the viewer. At best, the viewer might think that the plinth and the geisha were not well matched in terms of their scale and materials; only prior knowledge of the objects in their original form or a close reading of the exhibition captions would reveal the misplacement that we established through this collaged arrangement. A third figure was added to the collage in the form of a Victorian greeting card depicting a woman with a gun; we “pasted” her into this display and she became another element for the viewer to interpret (Is she an onlooker? a witness? the protagonist?). Elza Adamowicz’s analysis of surrealist collage offers the possibility of understanding the kind of multi-faceted readings suggested by the arrangement captured in figure 2. Adamowicz states:

By juxtaposing apparently incongruous images, the collage stages different modes of interaction between signs, and thus invites various readings, whether parodic, poetic or simply playful. The arrangement of the collage elements seems to present a rebus, challenging the viewer to solve the enigma of their juxtaposition by combining the disparate elements in a coherent reading. (28)

Adamowicz identifies the challenge to the *viewer* to establish a coherent reading from dis-joined, mis-placed materials. As the *makers* of this collage we were not seeking coherence in reading. The triangulation that occurred – of Carson & Miller, the arranged materials, and the viewer – places the viewer in contact with “an endless production of fortuitous encounters” (Allmer iv). In so doing the viewer also became a contributor to this production, in essence a player in a game of exquisite corpse.

Exquisite corpse functions in a number of ways for Carson & Miller. In reference to *The Story of Things*, we identify three different stages to this practice: the first was our collaboration itself (where we passed ideas back and forth); the second was our mode of production (in this instance, the selection, arrangement and display of materials which became an “unfolded” exquisite corpse); and third, the resultant exquisite corpse put into dialogue with the viewer (where the viewer became a player, taking over the game). In figure 3, two bodies (or “corpses”) face one another. The body on the left is a copy of a fifteenth century putto. The body on the right is constructed from various elements: a pile of books, a Japanese lacquered vase stand, and what might be either a doll’s head or lamp fitting<sup>9</sup>. The putto represented a significant volume of artifacts and materials in Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections signifying religious belief. As artists and curators we wanted to enter a dialogue with this material and felt compelled to identify strategies of display that would enable this dialogue, both for us and for the viewer.

Taking the stages of Carson & Miller’s use of exquisite corpse, as outlined above, in this example our collaboration began with the passing back and forth of our perception of the aura of the putto and its potency. Our discussion quickly revealed our desire to challenge the meaning and power that this object represented to us and, in doing this, we decided to bring it into dialogue with material from the collections that “personified” different logics. The second stage – that of production – saw us build a body to make material a challenge to the putto’s symbolic power; this was a body of knowledge, constructed from a selection of scientific text books related to the understanding and treatment of body and mind. The vase stand and doll’s head/lamp fitting were further elements collaged onto the stack of books to aid the visual suggestion of a body. Indeed our discovery of this disembodied head in the collections compelled us to build the body, to complete it.<sup>10</sup> While these two figures were in dialogue with one another within the confines of the shelf of the cabinet in which we placed them, other exquisite corpses unfolded out of them and toward them, making “imaginative bridges” (Breton 95) between logical meaning and potentiality. These “bridges” manifested themselves in the wider context of the gallery’s arrangement: film footage of religious ceremonies repeated endlessly with sounds of incantation emanating from this footage, circling around the gallery; an adjacent cabinet magnified intimate scenes of erotica which we framed with the empty apertures of photo albums; such displays of the body echoed in an alternative spectacle of the physical world which was presented in looped footage showing divers from the 1950s plunging into the water again and again.

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<sup>9</sup> As identified by the Keeper of the Collections.

<sup>10</sup> We note here that we worked in close dialogue with the staff responsible for the Collections, and particularly with the Object Conservator and Paper Conservator when resolving our desired modes of display.



Figure 3: Detail of an exhibition cabinet from *The Story of Things*.



Other exquisite corpses proliferated in the gallery; the arrangement in figure 2, which we have identified as a collage, also represented an exquisite corpse. As with the exhibition, in *Scrapbook* our production of both collages and exquisite corpses is important and closely linked. Indeed we would posit that *Scrapbook (the story of things)* is in itself an exquisite corpse, in line with the observations of Allmer and Sears:

The scrapbook, an assemblage of fragments of old and new texts, contains the symbolic potential to be the 'Bible' of modernism . . . , dissolving coherent narrative, just as the exquisite corpse, in its reliance on the fragmentary composition of monstrosity, reveals itself as modernism's mythic representative in the manner of the hybrid, folded monster, and of ancient mythic figures evident in surrealism's focus on beings such as Melusine and Minotaur, whose bodies were half human/half animal. (Allmer and Sears viii)

Figure 4 depicts the contents page of *Scrapbook*, showing the list of section headings contained within the book. The page presents an aesthetic of logic (the overall grid-like presentation of the scrap elements, the use of a page title and a list of page numbers) and uses language that appears to "make sense" (the headings proffer terms that are either complementary or opposite but which imply logic). However, this sense making is subsequently punctured once the reader visits the materials that are collaged under the headings within the main body of the book (see figure 8, for example, which shows the start of the section "People & Places"). An exquisite corpse manifests itself on the page depicted in figure 4 in two pertinent ways: in the paired terms which conjoin in the section headings ("Fact & Fable," "Inside & Outside") and which form their own self-contained exquisite corpses; and in the stacking, the piling up, of Carson & Miller's categories that form a "body of knowledge" (like the one that faced the putto in figure 3), an arbitrary framework that has the appearance of order, of sense. The aesthetic of the contents page gives the impression of gravitas; this can be seen in the selection of typefaces used, as their styles are reminiscent of archetypal textbooks that represent completeness of knowledge. In themselves the presentation of these headings is convincing, but juxtaposition punctures the gravitas that each heading could possess; each scrap is on a different style of paper and is, of course, cut out and stuck down on to another surface as if signifying they were once part of something complete from which they have now been fragmented.<sup>11</sup> Craft, here, is disruptive; it is a visual acknowledgement of the arbitrary framework we established, a framework which is made material in the cut edges of the scraps, in the snipping, pasting and sticking of them. The page, like all the pages in *Scrapbook*, sees us focus ". . . on their assemblage, the real site of . . . rejuvenation" (Adamowicz 31).

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<sup>11</sup> This sense of fragmentation is purely an impression we created. In fact we commissioned these "scraps" from typesetter and printer Bracketpress.

In this rejuvenation, chance and accident resound. Indeed, these principles are at play in both the exhibition and the scrapbook – we played and chance and accident occurred. It was important to be led by such random incidents but to be aware that not all would lead to satisfactory production. A strategy of abandonment mattered here as much as one of pursuit; games could be left unresolved and play did not have to be concluded. Figure 5 displays chance encounters in the three text scraps printed on blue graph paper, pasted on to the right-hand page. We happened upon these phrases as we watched archival film footage; the texts were snippets of sound or were in the background of scenes (scraps in themselves). We allowed them to lead our play as part of our exploration of the significant religious content of the collections. Childhood informed our attraction to this particular game; the material resonated with our concrete experiences of these types of texts in our separate upbringings. This provoked a round of show and tell as we compared memories and negotiated how to make such memories material within the pages of *Scrapbook*. As a result, these three scraps were crafted to do more than simply reproduce what we had seen and heard. They were invested with our handicraft as we drew, stenciled, cut, and pasted them. Again, exquisite corpse was evident as source material was put into dialogue with Carson & Miller and assembled into another entity. This entity is reflective of its source, of our interpretation of this source (as Carson & Miller) and, in this instance, of our childhood memories (which were experienced independently of one another but were put into collision here both with each other and with other material in the collections).

Exquisite corpse reiterates itself again in the wider arrangement visible in figure 5. The chance encounters of these three scraps collided with other materials we came upon in our play: a hymn-sheet with an illustration of the tree of life, a Victorian Christmas greeting card which depicts a dead blue tit (truly an exquisite corpse), a line from the Lord's Prayer,<sup>12</sup> and a photograph of a copy of a fifteenth-century tabernacle.<sup>13</sup> Presented under the section heading "Fact & Fable," this double-page spread displays our gathering of things that relate to the tension between these ideas. The items shown have a connecting thread but do not offer the reader a coherent or complete explanation; instead their arrangement relates Carson & Miller's subjective value system, or at least the system we established within the confines of these two pages and at that moment of our arranging. Predicating our arrangement on this subjective system highlighted the importance of play in our process and in our display, making evident a value system we remember from childhood play, but which could also be said to align to Malebranche's observation regarding the seventeenth-century *Wunderkammer*,

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<sup>12</sup> This particular "scrap" was also commissioned from Bracketpress.

<sup>13</sup> Depicting a detail of *Tobit and the Angel*, copied from the original fifteenth-century tabernacle by Andrea della Robbia in the Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence, by Figli di Guiseppe Cantagalli, glazed terracotta (1898).

“... where nothing has any real worth, and where the price depends solely on imagination, on passion and on chance” (Malebranche qtd. in Westerhoff 643).

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Figure 4: Contents page from *Scrapbook (the story of things)* by Carson & Miller, published by Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections, 2009.

## The *Wunderkammer* and the Unreliable Teller

... the wonder – the allure – of the *Wunderkammer's* strange objects depends in large part on taking them *out* of history, making them the 'everyday' emblems of cultural formations that are at one and the same time different . . . yet comfortably docile and unchanging. (Harris 116)

When we began working with the Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections we decided to approach them not through historical, ethnographic, or anthropological frameworks but through play and narrative. Inevitably, choosing to work in this way discarded accepted ways of presenting knowledge through museum artifacts and materials. This was a decision that came out of our previous working methods. As collaborative artists we have used play, dialogue, exchange, and narrative as methods of art production, and this has resulted in a range of works including question-and-answer game playing, book- and map-works, and collaborative drawing. It was a natural progression for us to take these production strategies and apply them in this curatorial context. Our intention was not to use the collection in an ironic way or to mock the usual purpose of a museum and its holdings; neither was it to present materials in a whimsical or purely aesthetic manner. Our intention was to seek an iteration of "endless production" (Allmer iv) which could make meaning, but meaning that allowed further meaning to be sought, meaning that was not conclusive or definitive.

We wanted to tell a story of things, to narrate the collections. In this context we could be seen as the counterpoint of Gregory Currie's theory of fiction "that there is a reliable teller" perceived within what Currie identifies as "games of make-believe"<sup>14</sup> (73). Currie proposes that "... strategies for working out what is true in the story are closely connected with the idea that there is a reliable teller who is our access to these events" (73). In curating *The Story of Things* we put ourselves forward as "unreliable tellers," narrators who present stories of things that are concerned with knowledge and logic but who frame these through play, through make-believe. Traditionally, the curator is framed as someone who is – who should be – a reliable teller; an expert, as Anthony Burton observes, whose expertise carries with it an accepted integrity that furnishes him or her with the ability to "keep" the collection (indicating that the role of curator is linked with the idea of safe keeping of the objects and their meaning, much like care-taking and the role of the caretaker). Currie's reliable teller is of course fictional but is a teller "... who *does*<sup>15</sup> believe these things and whose beliefs are reliable" (73). As

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<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note here that Currie uses the term "game" which we relate to our use of the term "play."

<sup>15</sup> Our emphasis.

artist-curators, our unreliable position was that we were not fictional, that (while we did believe things) our beliefs were – indeed are – at the same time, fluid, subject to change, and therefore unreliable. The unreliability came not from a lie but from our beliefs; these beliefs were influenced by, but not necessarily founded in, the grand narrative. Our perception was not linear but was multi-faceted, allowing for numerous meanings; indeed we held multiple views of the same artifact at any given moment resulting, therefore, in further negotiation of meaning.



Figure 5: Double page spread from *Scrapbook (the story of things)* by Carson & Miller, published by Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections, 2009.

In sharp contrast to this is Burton's description of curator Sir Henry Cole's "didactic" approach to the collection later to become the Victoria & Albert Museum (375). Our strategies of display recall the historic *Wunderkammer* which typically presented an order that might be viewed as counter to today's methods of presenting knowledge and understanding but which applies, as Jan C. Westerhoff observes, "... an order which arranged things in such a way that they could communicate with one another, thus making their hidden interrelations visible" (645). Within the exhibition an example of this kind of ordering can be seen in figure 1, which shows a general view of part of the gallery. On the walls there is a series of images – a close-up of the face of an effigy, a reproduction of a photograph found in a Japanese souvenir album, and extracts from a hymn-sheet – which we arranged in order to establish a relationship between them and the display cabinet in the foreground. In terms of their usual existence within the

museum (that is, the various arrangements in which these artifacts would be found in the museum storage areas), these “things” had not previously been put into contact with one another; a new dialogue emerged through our arrangement. The contents of the cabinet (a detail of which is provided in figure 6) presented a chaotic display; a broken glass lay next to overturned skittles and a lip-shaped ear clip was perched on the rim of a wine glass. This arrangement, along with others in the exhibition, turned away from conventional museum presentation; here, things were placed yet mis-placed, joined and dis-joined, related and separated. This arrangement acknowledged the qualities of these objects and also set up a relationship between the different categories of objects within the case. We had experienced these categories “behind the scenes” where we saw objects related by type – glass objects were stored together, wooden artifacts kept side-by-side.



Figure 6: Detail of an exhibition cabinet from *The Story of Things*. (Featuring red PVC “Lellebel” ear clip by Herman Hermsen, 1983. © Herman Hermsen).

Experiencing this version of order and logic encouraged us to disrupt it and to produce a new iteration, which nevertheless was predicated on a type of logical order, albeit of “misuse” or “misinterpretation.” At the time, we noted that things in the exhibition were “misused for play.”<sup>16</sup> The notion of “misuse” is implicit in

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<sup>16</sup> Various conversations and interviews took place between Carson & Miller and Patricia Allmer prior to the mounting of *The Story of Things* and the publication of *Scrapbook (the story of things)*, as well as once the exhibition was underway (2009). This dialogue is referred to here but is unpublished elsewhere.

play, as is clear from the word's negative connotations in expressions such as "playing with somebody" or in the parental warning "don't play with it." Burton presents and discusses photographs of a number of curators in the years between the 1930s and 1950s which show them handling museum objects expertly, fixing them with a studious gaze that looks as if they are "reading" the object in their possession. In counter-point to this, our approach to handling objects was linked to the idea of *playing* with them. The arrangement of the case in figure 6 implied this sort of handling; "systematical confusion and disorder" (Ernst 28) was carefully crafted by our hands, contributing to the material culture which objects accrue as they move "... through different hands, contexts, and uses" (Appadurai 34).

This productive "misuse" was also evident in a "micro-narrative" that we established within the overall narrative of *The Story of Things*. We misinterpreted a plaster cast of a female effigy from a thirteenth-century Parisian tomb. Part of her fascination for us was what appeared to be bloody tears that ran down her face. But it was only once the effigy's inclusion in the exhibition was decided that we understood the "real" meaning of these tears; they were in fact graffiti painted on to the figure's face by art students when the artifact was utilized for study in the late twentieth century prior to its entry into the museum's collection. This reflects Appadurai's observation regarding the gathering of material culture to the object, through the handling of the object by different parties. In this instance, the students' act quite literally alters the context of the object and diverts the story. While the discovery of the origins of these tears might have rendered our reading of the object "inauthentic," we chose to substitute inauthenticity for make-believe, preferring our assumption about the figure's tears (that they had always been there). Our choice reflected a child's total power over its playthings, its omnipotence (Winnicott 2005), which we instinctively reconnected with in our willing suspension of disbelief.

Perception of this artifact was shifted further by the transformation of the effigy from object into image. The figure only ever appeared in the exhibition as a photograph (a closely cropped image of the effigy's face emphasizing the painted tears of blood can be seen in figure 7) manipulating further our experience of looking at her, and offering up a previously unseen viewing of her to exhibition visitors. Thus we played with the object *and* the prism through which it might be interpreted, inviting the viewer to experience our make-believe like a child directing an adult to join their imaginary tea party. In the gallery setting the effigy gazed out at the exhibition, contemplating the disorder of the cabinet with overturned glasses and scattered games. The effigy – along with the exhibition viewer – joined us in "the whirlwind" (Breton qtd. in Ernst 20) where our arrangements permitted things to "mingle freely with one another" (Westerhoff 644), to make "hidden interrelations visible" (645), and to permit "objective chance" (Breton qtd. in Ernst 20).



Figure 7: Photograph showing a detail of a cast (1897) of an effigy from a thirteenth century tomb in the Cathedral St. Denis, Paris.

In creating *Scrapbook*, we took the principles of the *Wunderkammer* and framed them within album pages. Ott, Tucker, and Buckler note an important historical relationship between the *Wunderkammer* and the scrapbook:

Such albums were often stored in a *Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities – a specially constructed bureau, gallery, or room in which albums were displayed along with objects as diverse as stuffed monkeys, botanical specimens, statuary, jewelry, paintings, and varied exotica. (6)

They also observe a development in the function of these albums: from the album as an artifact that formed part of a *Wunderkammer* into a volume that became, in itself, a *Wunderkammer*. Further to this, they identify the scrapbook as “the equivalent of a poor family’s cabinet of curiosities” (6). Our utilization of the scrapbook form came, in part, from the museum’s holding of a significant collection<sup>17</sup> of these volumes, some of which we selected to include in our exhibition arrangements. Indeed, we were influenced by the form of these scrapbooks and albums and the manner in which they capture both the material culture and the unique narratives of their creator. Our work in the physical space of the exhibition borrowed from the activity of these makers, and we saw the walls

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<sup>17</sup> The Sir Harry Page Collection of Scrapbooks, Albums & Commonplace Books.



and various cabinets of the exhibition space as blank pages of a scrapbook to be filled.

Our decision to create a scrapbook, as an alternative to the custom of producing an exhibition catalogue, allowed us to present yet another iteration of “endless production” (Allmer iv), and to re-handle, to re-arrange, materials once again. This is demonstrated in a double-page spread from *Scrapbook* which makes further use of the photograph of the effigy (see figure 8). As unreliable tellers, we presented this double-page spread in an apparently ordered and categorized fashion; however, it brings together material that is as much in “the whirlwind” as the chaotic display visible in figure 6. While the image of the effigy appears much as it did in the exhibition, as an observer, the geography of the pages gives a closer relationship to the other ephemera presented. Mirroring some of the strategies of the exhibition, where we had put things literally in touch with one another (piled, stacked, strewn, balanced), the *Scrapbook* encouraged us to further this approach. Here, scraps touch, overlap, and can be moved around the pages or interleaved elsewhere in the book. In Figure 8, a hand-embroidered scrap is contained within its own envelope but is not anchored to the page; readers may move it and strike up other connections as they wish. Other loose scraps exist elsewhere within the book to permit interaction, to allow readers to determine further, personalized arrangements and, therefore, to produce readings of their own.

The term “scrap” belies the power of this ephemeral item to “tell”: scraps that are then combined escalate a telling. In the pages illustrated in figure 8, the left hand page shows two paper figures in silhouette. Each was found loosed from its origin (perhaps where glue had failed or where the original maker or owner had chosen not to attach the scrap). Their appearance was striking; because they were found separate from the pages to which they belonged they were further disassociated from their original meaning (bodies disembodied). Our arrangement of them on the page sees them overlapping two female figures. These particular scraps attracted us because they had been altered and tampered with. Each figure had been scribbled over by an unknown hand; this scribbling both altered the original meaning of the scrap but also allowed new meaning to emerge. This act of alteration, the evidence of another hand, gave us permission to “tamper” further, thus putting us into dialogue with “different hands, contexts, and uses” (Appadurai 34), making yet another form of contact, of arrangement – expanding another unreliable telling.



Figure 8: Double page spread from *Scrapbook (the story of things)* by Carson & Miller, published by Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections, 2009.

### Wandering, Wondering, Marveling, Dreaming

Children set off each day without a worry in the world. Everything is near at hand, the worst material conditions are fine. The woods are white or black, one will never sleep. (Breton 3-4)

Wandering, wondering, marveling, dreaming – these terms outline for us essential approaches to our collaborative practice and to the creative drive that emerges from it which is captured in play. They capture things that are hard to express, the intangible dimensions of how we work. To draw together what we have discussed here we will now consider these terms in the context of our practice and, in particular, in reference to the exhibition *The Story of Things* and our artists' book *Scrapbook (the story of things)*. In part, we identify with Breton's words: there are times when we, as Carson & Miller, inhabit the role of the children he identifies and, together, wander through the woods. Our best experience of working together is when we create without consideration of consequences, as children do in play; that is, without knowing in which direction a game might take us. This working "in the moment" is countered by our stepping out of the game, looking at where we have been and what we have done. Our woods are not "white or black," that is, they are not rational or irrational but are in between this binary, they are the site where we find the "clarity" that Ernst describes (in the context of collage) as a result of "the irrational action" (29). In the work under consideration

here it was the material culture of the Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections through which we wandered and roamed. Evidence of roaming and exploration was apparent in the historic *Wunderkammer* as a visual and material representation of knowledge. The *Wunderkammer* offers us, as artists working today, a motif that is both valuable and productively unstable. It is this combination that allows us to both *play in the Wunderkammer* and to *play a game of Wunderkammer*. The strategies of arrangement and display present in the historic *Wunderkammer* provide us with a principle of juxtaposition that makes, as we have highlighted earlier, “hidden interrelations visible” (Westerhoff 645); adopting this principle allows Carson & Miller to embrace contradictions which are then displayed within the single framework of the *Wunderkammer*. These contradictions – such as sense and nonsense, the reliable and the unreliable – help us to negotiate the meanings we wish to arrive at but also allow viewers, in dialogue with us, to undertake their own negotiations; these contradictions do not take truth as their primary objective but acknowledge that truth “admits of degree” (Currie 91).

Perhaps the wonderful, the marvelous, is located between these contradictions, in the same place in which clarity lies? Play was our route to this location and the museum holdings were the toys with which we played – casting us back into our roles as children who were “weaned on the marvelous” (Breton 15) and permitting us, as adults, to inhabit “. . . a more open space of play, as when a child fingers a piece of felt cloth, sensory stimulation dominates; the child plays around with the felt, experiments with it, the dialogue with material objects begins” (Sennett 269). Things and our interaction with them matter. Things, in and of themselves, provoke wonder but, when arranged in contact with one another, a further iteration of wonder is possible: “an endless production” (Allmer iv). In the exhibition and scrapbook our concern with arrangement and wonder was visible in the stacking, balancing, overlapping and interleaving, in our “putting things in touch” – in unfolding the exquisite corpse, looking at the result and the traces of the “fold” required to make it.

For some viewers the initial experience of the exhibition and scrapbook registered as one of cacophony and dissonance but – as Ernst describes – “an alchemy” emerges “from the unexpected meeting of two or more heterogeneous elements. . .” (28). This alchemy frees the viewer to join us as adults inhabiting the position of the child at play, experiencing what Bill Brown identifies as:

the child’s ‘tactile tryst’ . . . . One must imagine that this *experience* in the everyday foretells a different human *existence*. If the use-value of an object amounts to its preconceived utility, then its misuse value should be understood as the unforeseeable potential within the object, part of an uncompleted dream. (Brown 955-56)

Wonder and marvel take over. Our arrangements do not seek conclusion or demand that the dream be completed; rather they invite the viewer to dream with us.

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## Acknowledgements

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