



THE MUSEUM OF UNUSUAL INSTRUMENTS
PRESENTED BY THE ELLIPTICAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION



PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Museum of Unusual Instruments was established around a collection of unusual objects—instruments with sensitive, intuitive capabilities—providing a context to share their stories and build a network of relations between them. The story of the Museum is told through its anonymous founders, and the archivists who dedicate themselves to the stewardship of the instruments. This parallel history weaves together historical events between 1908 and the present day with fictional museum archives. The collection and its archives bring together and reframe points of history across cultures, mediating between differing views of the material reality of objects, and tensions between approaches of naturalism and animism.

The narratives of the Museum deal with the need to scientifically rationalize unexplainable phenomena, as well as issues of musealization, collection practices, relations with indigenous peoples, themes of magical realism, and the communicative strategies of ritual and storytelling. The outcome of this work is planned as a series of chapters that reveal the history of the Museum through installations including objects, texts, archival materials, works on paper, and video works. These activities will be supported through the creation of an institutional website for the Museum (themoui.org) with accompanying online and print publications. The first three chapters will be presented in installations during the period of October 2013 – December 2014. A key aspect of this project is to build a framework for collaboration with other artists and curators who can contribute to the development of the Museum, creating a flexible and evolving apparatus for cultural and artistic exploration.

DESCRIPTION OF THEMES

The Museum of Unusual Instruments supports a collection of objects that act as mediators between human perception and the world: bridges between society, knowledge, and nature. These tools foster connections across geographic and ethnic boundaries, creating and sustaining a dialogue between different ways of thinking. They are instruments that fold together opposing points of classification into a more flexible structure of study: Western and non-Western, modern and pre-modern, naturalist and animist.

The Museum and its instruments can help provide access to a kind of knowledge that crosses the cultural and linguistic barriers usually associated with transcultural exchange. We can approach these instruments as guides to understand the world, allowing what is unknown about them to be a productive uncertainty. Anthropological, scientific and mythological researches are tools to question the transcultural values that regulate the exchange of knowledge through the production of myths and objects. This process examines our respective positions in reality, redefining the role of language and representation in relation to nature and history, leaving our knowledge in a continuous condition of reshaping and enrichment. The origins of the instruments and their stories cross the singularity of any particular language, placing a universal need at the core of their existence, a common research into understanding our relationship to our reality. The Museum investigates transcultural values to find commonality and difference, and to examine the way these values have shifted over time. The notion of symmetrical anthropology, as presented by Bruno Latour in *We Have Never Been Modern*, is a reference in understanding the necessity of bridging the divides between cultures, and between humans and non-humans in favour of a networked approach. The principle of a symmetrical study requires the establishment of equality between these points to trace the forms of nature and society.

The founders of the Museum considered themselves explorers and anthropologists, and collected each instrument personally in their quest to understand what experiences unite different peoples, and what forces shape mythologies and an understanding of the unknown. Objects were collected only when they were given by the rightful owner, and only when the owner understood and agreed with the intentions of the Museum. The founders developed this policy in the hope that their collection method would be free of colonialist appropriations. Today, one of the tasks we address is to reconnect the objects with their origins, reversing their dispersion and disconnection. With each chapter of the Museum, we are facilitating a dialogue from different perspectives using analysis of the instruments, their narratives, and display as a starting point. By inviting researchers and curators from different backgrounds to collaborate, we can create a network of different approaches, and make connections between diverse researches. Our concern as visual artists is to deal with matters of presentation of pre-modern and non-Western practices, especially trying to narrate the objects without exploiting their exotic aspects.

Chapter 1: The Department of Meteors

The Museum as it appears today is a reconstruction presented through a series of chapters. We retrieve instruments dispersed across the globe after the Second World War and reconnect them with their original histories, archival materials, and place in the story of the Museum. In the first chapter, *The Department of Meteors*, the origins of the Museum are explained through a story about a boy whose village is affected by the arrival of a strange and unexplained stone, and how his life is changed by an encounter with a traveling medicine man. This encounter plants a seed of curiosity within him, and the questions in his mind lead him to meet the founders of the Museum, and become the first Archivist of the Museum of Unusual Instruments. The first chapter is chronologically the second exhibition, and includes a narrative history of the Museum's origin with accompanying archival materials (fig 1-2), as well as a display of objects collected through the first Archivists' life in his quest to understand the relationship of meteors to sympathetic magic, quantum physics, global wheat markets, and the 1930s Berlin cabaret underworld.

Chapter 2: Unusual Navigation Instruments

The stories of the instruments retrace their provenances, at times involving relations with indigenous peoples such as the Inuit, or pre-modern civilizations such as the Nuragics of Sardinia, as in the second chapter of the Museum: *Unusual Navigation Instruments*. This exhibition includes three instruments united by their unusual navigation capacities, presented as objects, archival materials, works on paper, and a documentary field work video. The first instrument is a perceptive rope that shifts into shapes according to an intrinsic alphabet (fig 3). Once the language of the rope is understood, it assists with navigation in accordance to the needs of the user. The second instrument is a map system given to the Museum by a scientist studying in Canada, who was assisted by an Inuit man during a state of seemingly immeasurable disorientation. This type of wooden three-dimensional map system was made to be felt rather than seen while traveling by boat, and would float if dropped overboard. The landmass is abstracted while the edges contain important information about the shoreline, developed by non-visual cues such as the sound of waves against the shore (fig 4). The last instrument is a set of symmetric wooden sound boxes imbued with an unbreakable connection. These boxes and history are placed in the context of the Barbagia region of Sardinia, notorious for its secrecy and ability to hide things (infamously, kidnapping victims) in a way that only local people are able to find. Created from twin trees, under which a pair of supposedly telepathically connected twins were buried, the boxes transmit to each other in a range of frequencies that shift according to how far apart they are, and work on a similar principle to Aboriginal songlines, recording aspects of the landscape as markers so that they can find each other when separated. This story will be developed as a field research video, tracing the origins of the symmetric sound boxes to their place of origin in Sardinia and the pre-modern history of the Nuragic people (fig 5-7), and how their capacity for connection allowed the hidden instruments to be found. This chapter looks

at the relevance of artistic practices in translating stories embodied in the physical shapes and images of the instruments, and the way territory can be traced based on an experience of the landscape.

The instruments are presented as having different functions and meanings, and their display is conceived as an open structure, involving the viewer in the production of meaning connected to his or her own sensitive capabilities. In this way, the objects as well as the other activities and projects of the Museum all become part of a larger apparatus of cultural exploration. This framework considers mutual and communal agency, and the objects become part of a circuit of relations activated by the conceptual framework of each department. The Museum collection also reflects our part in this circuit and role as instruments: as we try to define and decipher their being, we are ourselves actively questioned and being activated. Graham Harman addressed the concept of being in non-human entities, exploring the existence of objects independent of human perception. This object-oriented philosophy serves as a reference in considering that the instruments have relations with their environment, context, and other instruments that are outside of our knowledge or control. These relations are only partially accessible to our consciousness, but we try to unveil these complex and obscure points of connection to discover the full depth of the instruments' functionality. When we notice anomalies in the instruments we may associate them with malfunctioning, but it draws our attention to their less understandable properties: what appears to be outside of our knowledge is made visible by the way it withdraws from us. The instruments mediate between us and the unknown, connecting us to what is perhaps unknowable. These anomalies point to alternative views of the object, helping us perceive it more as it actually is than as we believe it is, and it is the apparatus of the Museum that serves to highlight these apparent malfunctions and initiate discourse.

Chapter 3: The Department of Serpents and Rainbows

A recurring topic explored through the instruments is their relation with the visible language of the world. This intrinsic language of signs, seen in the recurring similitude of forms or resemblances, enables us to understand systems of classification based on the shape of things. The concept of resemblance expressed by Foucault in his text, *The Order of Things*, describes a correlation between language and the visual signs of the natural world that was held as epistemically certain knowledge until the sixteenth century. In the third chapter, *the Department of Serpents and Rainbows*, this notion is resurrected and reconfigured to examine the way the instruments communicate with us. This third exhibition explores the theme of similitude with instruments derived from the forms of snakes, exploring their place in rituals and mythologies. A second field work video will explore their sensitive capabilities and capacity as instruments for sensing vibrations (fig 8). The perceived resemblances of serpents to meteorological phenomena such as lightning and rainbows (fig 9), or waterways, are an entry point to a discussion of the forms of nature as an intrinsic language of the world that traverse global narratives. At the origins of this language, it was not divided from the world, or the things in it, but a perfect derivation, visible across its surface. In reconnecting the lost histories of the instruments, we seek a language that presently seems fractured and distant from

the world, dividing us from everything else. When the instruments are activated they communicate with a language that is in perfect harmony with the world, where signs are things, places, and directions.

The Museum collection was initially held in a central location, but historical and political events forced it to take a more decentralized form, as did certain unstable properties witnessed in the instruments when they were kept together. The development of a more nomadic structure reflected the founders' vision of an open platform with roots stretching across a variety of cultures, never bound to a single nation. As opposed to a tree-like conception of knowledge, branching out from a central structure, Deleuze and Guattari described the use of a rhizomatic structure to consider decentralized and non-hierarchical approaches to data, research, and interpretation. This method of de-structuring and de-territorializing is adopted by the Museum, with cultural differences used as landmarks in the theoretical territory explored by the founders. Deleuze and Guattari note that "the nomad has a territory; he follows customary paths; he goes from one point to another; he is not ignorant of points (water points, dwelling points, assembly points, etc.)... A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the *intermezzo*." The Museum functions as a map, trying to connect the different paths followed by the instruments in an evolving and open discourse, constructing an overall composition of unfolding *intermezzos* that enable us to see the single points from different perspectives. In each location where a chapter or department of the Museum is presented, it takes into account the history of that place, weaving into it and connecting with it through stories and material artifacts. In this way, the Museum is a nomadic organism that is rooted everywhere. The third exhibition would include and build on the history of the first two, telling the story of a Cologne-based researcher who had previously studied the serpent instruments, revealing why they were dispersed to different locations during the Second World War.



Archival Material for Chapter 2: Unusual Navigation Instruments
Pilgrim's Shrine with Perceptive Rope Flag

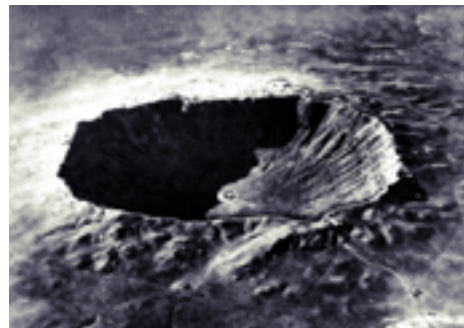
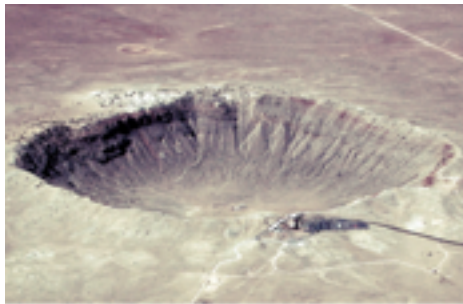
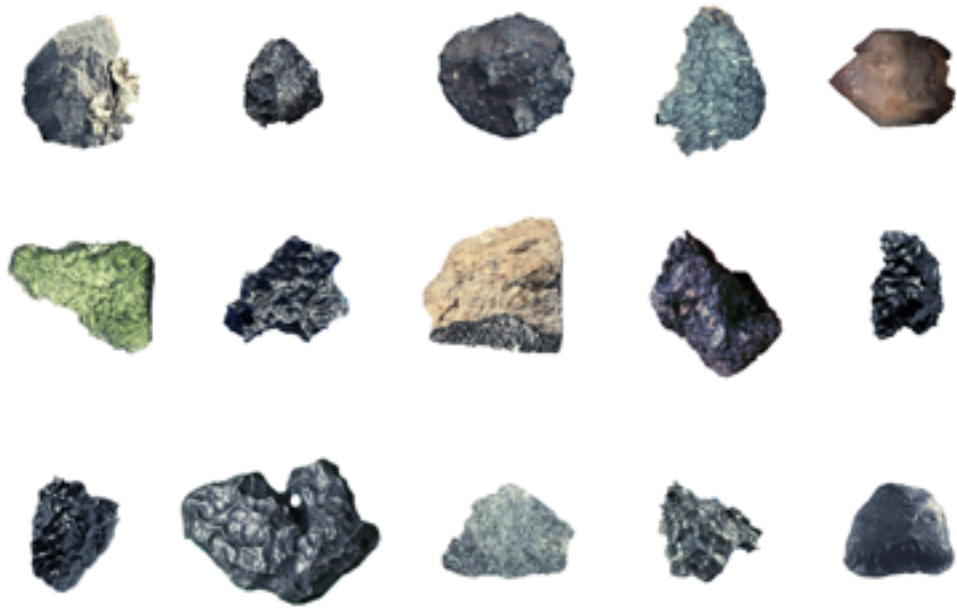


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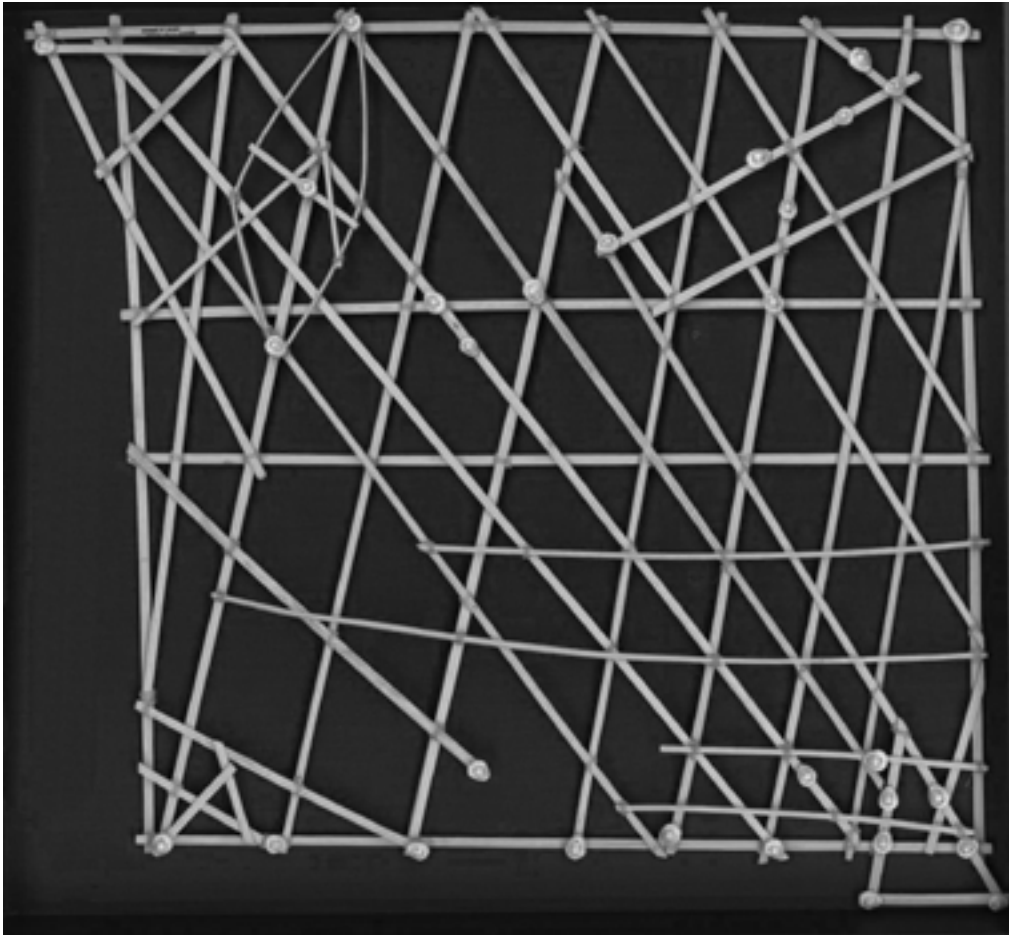


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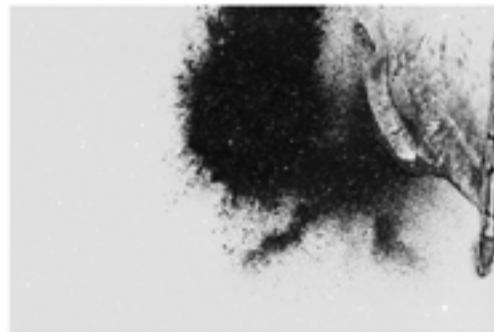
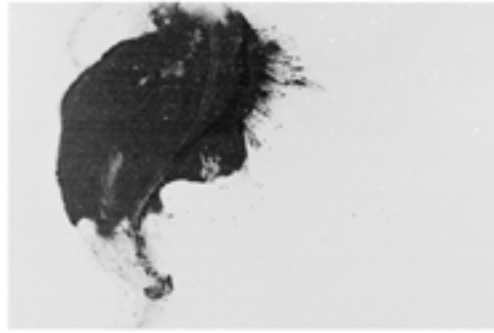


Archival Material for the Department of Meteors, top to bottom:
Figure 1: Known and Suspected Meteorites; Figure 2: Crater Studies



Archival Material for Unusual Navigation Instruments, top to bottom:

Figure 3: Polynesian Stick Map; Figure 4: Three-dimensional wooden maps of the Inuit



Archival Material for Department of Serpents and Rainbows, top to bottom:
Figure 8: Study of Snake Movements; Figure 9: Study of Rainbow Forms

ELLIPTICAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION MEMBERS

Sarah Stein (born 1978) is a Canadian artist and researcher from Victoria, BC, Canada, currently working in Berlin, Germany. She holds a Bachelor of Commerce degree from the University of Victoria, a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Emily Carr University of Art and Design, and a Master of Arts in Fine Arts degree from the Utrecht Graduate School of the Arts, the Netherlands. Her installations use elements of drawing, writing and video to explore the mediation of experience through perception, language, and the construction of narratives. In her research, forms are examined as indexical remains of processes of feeling, memory, perception, and knowledge.

In 2011, her work was selected for inclusion in the symposium *New Directions in Drawing*, Vancouver, BC, and she curated and participated in the exhibition *Present Imperfect, Future Tense* at Gallery Fukai, Vancouver. In 2012, she worked as an artist assistant at Documenta (13), and her work was included in the exhibitions *To Follow a Line* at the Campbell River Public Gallery, Campbell River, BC, *Three Artists Walk into a Bar*, organized by De Appel Curatorial Programme, Amsterdam, and *Longing/Belonging: Narrating Space Through the Experiences of a City*, Academie Gallerie, Utrecht. A solo exhibition based on her MA thesis project titled *The Opening: Structures of Uncertainty* was presented at MEME arte contemporanea e prossima, Cagliari, Italy in November 2012.

Enrico Piras (Italy, 1987) is an Italian visual artist and researcher, based in Cagliari, Italy. He holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in painting from the Accademia di Belle Arti di Sassari, and a Master of Arts in Fine Arts degree from the Utrecht Graduate School of the Arts, the Netherlands. His work has been shown mainly in Italy and the Netherlands; in 2011 he was selected among the winners of the award Premio O.R.A. by the gallery Zelle Arte Contemporanea in Palermo. He worked as an artist assistant and performer at Documenta 13 (2012) for the artist Paul Ryan, and participated to the Maybe Educational Program hosted in Kassel by Documenta 13. In 2012 his work was shown in the Netherlands in the exhibitions *Three Artists Walk into a Bar...*, organized by De Appel Curatorial Programme and *Longing-belonging: Narrating Space Through the Experiences of a City*, Academie Gallerie, Utrecht and in Italy at Zelle Arte Contemporanea in the exhibition *The Ruin Gazer*, curated by Maria Giovanna Virga.