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The Curator Vanishes: Period Room as Crime Scene

BY Robin Cembalest

A disappearance, a discovery, and a mystery at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, via
Mark Dion

On March 27, 1954, Barton Kestle, first curator of modern art at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, boarded a train for Washington, D.C., and was never seen again.

A shy specialist in the Soviet Avant-Garde, Dada, and Surrealism, Kestle had usually worked late into the night at the museum's grand McKim, Mead, & White building, his office placed near the front entrance so he wouldn't trip up alarms. This explains how staff came to accidentally seal and paint over his door during a rushed construction job some time in the '50s.

Two year ago, employees found his door and stepped into Kestle's world.



Curator Elizabeth Armstrong surveyed the vintage habitat of the forgotten Modernist scholar—his art and books; his high-tech-at-the-time Underwood Model 150 Typewriter, Polaroid Land Camera, and Graflex filmstrip projector; his clock radio and the other streamlined, mass-produced objects wearing their Deco

heritage proudly; his ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts. She saw not just a time capsule, but an opportunity.

And that's how the Minneapolis Institute got its newest period room.

Or not.

Of course on March 21, the same day Kestle's office goes on view, the museum opens "More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness," a contemporary-art exhibition—named after Stephen Colbert's catchphrase—that explores shifting notions of "reality." Near Kestle's office, which is labeled as such and blocked (as period rooms usually are) with a barrier, there is also another label, for a Mark Dion site-specific installation called *Curator's Office*, dated 2012-13.

If you didn't know who Mark Dion is, you might wonder if the artist were in fact the creation of another curator, and so on.



But as the label explains, Dion is a real artist, who plays roles of scientist, curator, archeologist, and scholar to create elaborate installations in the territory where *Night at the Museum* meets Borges. A fictional natural-history museum, a showcase for Dion's explorations into man's perceptions of living things, the planet, and the past, opened today at his New York gallery, Tanya Bonakdar, along with a survey of the artist's drawings, prints and multiples. Another new work, "The Octagon Room," a

Brutalist-style bunker appearing to house an abandoned office filled with archives chronicling Dion's career, opens on March 23 at MASS MoCA.

His 2011 piece *Waiting for the Extraordinary*, a wunderkammer and waiting room created for the University of Michigan, appeared at “More Real” when the exhibition debuted at SITE Santa Fe last year. But Armstrong, the show’s curator, wanted something new when it arrived on her home turf. She commissioned Dion to make a site-specific work for the institute. And so began his series of visits, research, and chats with employees who led the artist to parts of storage that Armstrong had never seen. “He embeds himself in the ecology of the place,” she says. “It’s a little like working with Christo. He asks questions that involves working with staff in different ways.”

The real curator and her colleagues watched the imaginary curator emerge as Dion requisitioned objects from collections, archives, and work spaces, purchasing others at flea markets and design stores over the course of a year and a half.



Collectively, they created a portrait of a New England-born, Ivy educated, left-leaning bachelor, with no close family or friends. He was well-traveled. He was an acolyte of Alfred Barr. And for some reason he'd attracted the attention of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, which had sent him a summons shortly before he vanished. Under this context (not to mention the real-life example of double agent Anthony Blunt) the items in his office become more suggestive.

“I wanted it to be reminiscent of a frozen crime scene, to build it into some noirlike story,” says the artist. “It’s never been solved what’s happened to him. It could be any number of things. Extreme McCarthyism, or some kind of scandalous past, perhaps homosexual.”



A wall label explains that Kestle, who was keenly interested in photography, lobbied the museum to start a department in the medium. (His thinking was ahead of its time; the department was founded in 1973.) He left behind his Highlander Polaroid Land Camera Model 80, the “picture-in-a-minute camera” (with its enormous flash) produced in 1954, as well as the green Graflex Compact 35mm Filmstrip Projector, an up-to-date tool for giving presentations. The indispensable Larousse and Art Index crowd the shelves along with Voltaire, Henry James, and—uh oh—Karl Marx. A white Melamine plastic cup and saucer from Russel Wright’s ca. 1953 Residential line is on the bottom shelf.



It was an era when curators were art handlers, accountants, registrars, couriers. Here's where Kestle would have tied up his brown paper packages with string and rubber-stamped them.



The Paymaster 8000 Ribbon Writer, ca. 1950, a contraption for cutting checks, along with a globe.



More photographic equipment along with two alarm clocks, including the Telechron Musalarm 8H67 Superheterodyne Alarm Clock produced in 1948. “With five tubes, 4-inch speakers, and a built-in antenna, the radio was a high-quality portable clock radio, a new concept to many consumers at the time,” the label will say. “Telechron’s designs combined innovations in household electronics with good design to create small artworks that every family could afford. The Musalarm 8H67 featured a sunburst design, streamlined plastic case, and rounded geometric numerals, all popular Art Deco motifs.”



More relics from a bygone museum culture.



Kestle's left-behind luggage. "There's the notion that this character is much better-traveled than what you would find in Minneapolis," says Dion. "He has things from different time zones, indicating a worldliness. I wanted to create a sense of this character just walking away."

The Curator's Office will vanish at the end of "More Real" on June 9.

Or will it?

All images: Mark Dion, Curator's Office, 2013, site-specific installation. All photos courtesy the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.