THE MUSEUM OF DOUBT

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A Modest Manifesto
by a Science Curator

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In and out of the coach: busloads of Asian tourists stumble through Flanders, blindly following the tour guide's flag. Visiting one highlight after another in search of superlatives in grandeur and uniqueness. Stuffed with French fries and mayonnaise, chocolate, and perhaps a special beer as well. Well, clichés aside, they must have been greatly surprised when in 2017 their cameras suddenly captured something quite different from a masterpiece by the Van Eyck brothers in the cloister of Ghent's majestic St Bavo's Cathedral. They were more than a little amazed by the confrontation with a whale skeleton, or, rather, the skeleton of a fin whale called Leo.

One year earlier, on the occasion of its 200th anniversary, the University of Ghent had appointed me as curator with the task of establishing a dialogue between its academic heritage and the urban fabric of which it is such an integral part. The University literally wanted to engage with the outside world and was looking for places to do so for a year within the dense cultural network of Ghent. Cultural institutes, including St Bavo's Cathedral, were approached with the request to provide accommodation. After a few introductory conversations with Canon Ludo Collin, in which I tentatively suggested placing a showcase with a number of items of memorabilia from the University's collections in one corner of the cathedral, we both felt that a larger and more grandi-

ose intervention would not be too high an ambition. And thus, a few months later, Leo's skeleton was ceremoniously brought in, in pieces.

As a morphologist and veterinarian, I had myself supervised the autopsy and salvaging of the animal in 2015. At the time I had not yet begun writing my thesis. Leo was the third large cetacean I had worked on but still I was overwhelmed by his impressive body. It's always an astonishing experience, meeting an animal that seems to come from some fantasy world. The more so because this particular whale arrived in Ghent harbour, literally at my back door. One may have performed hundreds of dissections on animals and been through the rites of passage a long time ago, but taking a knife to and cutting open the skin of such a magnificent creature causes a feeling that is somewhat unreal. A feeling of guilt may come over you, even as a scientist whose task it is to collect data in the 'bigger scheme of things'.

A feeling of powerlessness perhaps best describes the emotion evoked by the beaching of these giants. It is an all too human response that perhaps originates in vague recollections from our collective memory: until well into the Middle Ages the beaching of whales was seen as a bad omen. Beached whales were regarded as a display of the devil and the harbingers of disaster and evil. They represented 'the other'. Whale bones were sometimes

kept in churches in the Middle Ages. Hanging these bones in a religious context provided a reminder, and indirectly a warning, of the presence of evil in this world. The whale skeleton thus acquired an almost moralising function.

It would be naïve to regard these thought patterns as no more than residues of the past. Even today, events for which we have no ready-made explanation or that are hard to grasp lead to frustration that may express itself in negative reflections. Today still, the beaching of a whale causes awe and bewilderment. In our human minds, such phenomenal animals cannot beach 'just like that'. The mere fact that we feel the need to name the animal (usually after that day's saint) is an indication of our personal bond and feeling of responsibility. Global warming, sonar, and other human influences are often pointed out as the immediate culprits. If the 'expert' on the scene cannot immediately provide an explanation for this 'injustice', people quickly come up with one even before the autopsy has taken place. Researchers have a hard time convincing people that there is such a thing as coincidence and destiny and that animals also become sick from natural causes and grow old, causing them to weaken and end up on the beach. Or, as in the case of this young fin whale Leo, that the animal was hit and mortally wounded by a freighter. Imagine if, the

day before, the nuclear power plant in Doel had been shut down because of some technical malfunction: the prophets of doom would most probably have had a field day with that.

The urge to jump to conclusions and premature explanations is all too human and researchers are not completely immune to it either. Still, it is their responsibility to collect data and then articulate plausible hypotheses and communicate these in all their nuances and even doubts, regardless of and even against thinking of the intuitive kind. Even more so: science must provide researchers with the right instruments to prevent them from succumbing to the pitfalls of their own rationality. Seeing such a body at one's feet, revealing a large, gaping wound, can even lead seasoned scientists to spontaneously ascribe the cause of death to the obvious trauma, even though the wound may well have been inflicted post-mortem. Researchers have to fight continuously against taking their own intuition for granted. This makes a whale skeleton such as this a very suitable visual model through which visitors can experience the scientific process and the necessity of scientific methods; through which they can feel this personally.

Due to its success, Leo's stay in the cathedral was extended and eventually lasted a whole year. I stopped by regularly to observe the visitors. Their response was varied and wide-ranging, as were the messages I received. I saw excited schoolchildren stare and point in amazement, I saw numerous photographers with tripods and a whole arsenal of lenses walk and sit underneath the whale, observing and discussing its details. One could almost say: doing empirical research. I was thanked in letters, in emails, and in person for providing amazement, but I was also accused of blasphemy. This diversity of response and the controversy this installation triggered confirmed my conviction that the idea had been a success.

The installation was part of my exercise to find ways to experience science and translate scientific thinking into the context of an exhibition. I had first begun this thought exercise when Ghent University had decided to give access to its academic collections in a new public museum. The University took the brave decision to invest in managing its academic heritage and to build a space where this heritage could be shared with the public. The question that immediately followed from this was what story are these objects supposed to tell? What identity should this museum adopt and where should it position itself vis-a-vis both the research community

and the society in which it resides? What role in society should it fulfil?

The following is my personal response to this thought exercise. What unique position can a museum take in the landscape of science and the communication around knowledge production, and how can it do so? Why is it so important today, in 2020, with populism on the rise, that we as a science museum provide this content here, at the interface of culture and science? In a world where the answers to complex issues have to be given swiftly and straightforwardly without the possibility of review or testing, critical thinking is under pressure. In my opinion this is a poison that is not to be underestimated and which is sneaking into our brains and into society. An important mission of science museums should lie in opening up the scientific attitude. Together with its community, a museum should communicate why nuance, self-reflection, and doubt are not weaknesses but absolute strengths in the process of knowledge creation. This is the role that we as a science museum must claim. The thought exercise became a manifesto, a declaration of principle in progress, as this exercise is never finished but is always open-ended. I leave it open in order to be able to revise it, as an ongoing experiment. Unsurprisingly, my passion for integrating art and science turns out to be

a leitmotiv that is implicitly and explicitly present in this manifesto.


m
l MATRIX
K OPP. BUIGER
J DIEPE BUIGER
i TENDO INTEROSSEUS
h LIG. INTERSESAM.
d
MIDD. STRAALGROEVE
a BURSA PODOTROCHLEAR

1. Dare to be vulnerable

Producers of culture are sometimes tasked with evoking amazement, with enchanting and stimulating the individual and collective human mind. Evoking amazement is no simple matter these days. It can take dragging a whale into a cathedral. If the focus is not on the educational aspect of science museums, the enchanting nature of the collection is often pointed out. It is true that collections that evoke curiosity and amazement are ideal for drawing an audience. They are not called cabinets of curiosities or *Wunderkammer* for nothing. Such collections reflect mankind's curious and explorative nature, the urge to collect and thereby grasp the world, and the search for knowledge. Personally, I'm not entirely convinced about communicating amazement as the sole and primordial motivation of mankind for practising science. Nor do I think much of the idea of exploiting these wonders to make converts for science. Okay, we are all of us looking for enchantment, some of us even for that one miracle that will bring meaning. The search itself, and especially the idea that the ultimate key to solve all problems can be found, is comforting in the unbearable lightness of being. We continue to fight against day-to-day worries, hoping to find some solace and resignation in a moment of happiness caused by love, friendship,

entertainment, sport, beauty, culture, or whatever it may be. Well, I guess this search is universal and common to all ages, that it is in fact a very human effort.

Agreed, gaining insight and knowledge can definitely bring bliss. To my mind, however, this represents only part of the truth. It would do truth an injustice to ascribe our drive for scientific knowledge unequivocally to the quest for the intangible, to our curious human nature that leads us from one miracle to the next without ever being satisfied. In reality, the financing of research is subject to and driven by economic and geopolitical motivation. Which is problematic, but we must have the courage to say it and not conceal it from a wider audience. In that sense, the idea of wonder as the driving force for creating knowledge confirms a distorted and romanticised image of science and a problematic view of scientists. This notion, I think, starts from a defensive attitude, from a thought that in some way or other we have to gloss over the fact that we are practising science. To my taste, it reeks too much of representing science as a practice from the latest Pixar movie to make converts and convince policymakers to invest. Perhaps my main problem is with the word 'wonder': I associate it with woolliness, which tends to make me suspicious. I immediately start looking for the sales trick. I prefer the – admittedly less sexy – word 'contemplation' or 'doubt'