

Mathieu Cardin, What the Frog's Eye Tells the Frog's Brain

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l'atomisation sans cesse renouvelée du corps social? Certes, le statut de l'artiste contemporain reste contradictoire, voire ambivalent, mais ne serait-ce pas plutôt l'un de ces instruments d'observation qui, d'une certaine manière, a engendré ce paradoxe? La question reste ouverte.

1. Voir http://www.nicolasgrenier.com/info-about_my_work.html.
2. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, 2 vol., Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1997.
3. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1995.

Alban Loosli est un artiste-chercheur et doctorant en sémiologie à l'Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). Sa thèse doctorale, en cours de rédaction, porte sur la transition entre l'art moderne et l'art contemporain, et plus particulièrement sur les théories et les pratiques de l'art systémique (*Systems art*) entre 1955 et 1975. Il a d'ores et déjà publié plusieurs comptes rendus de livres et d'expositions pour les revues *Captures*, *Cygne Noir* et *l'Artichaut magazine*.

Mathieu Cardin, *What the Frog's Eye Tells the Frog's Brain*

Edwin Janzen

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In 1959, researchers at MIT published a risky but ultimately much-celebrated paper, "What the Frog's Eye Tells the Frog's Brain," on the function of the frog's optic nerve. Led by cognitive scientist Jerome Lettvin, the researchers proposed that the frog's optic nerve, previously thought simply to transmit light stimuli to the brain, was in fact a far more complex organ capable of sophisticated interpretive functions. Mathieu Cardin's exhibition at Vox takes its title from this paper, implicitly placing the visitor in the role of the frog—our eyes racing well ahead of our brains.

Confronting the visitor upon entry is a harshly-lit diorama of artificial rocks and flora set on an oddly-angled base. The rear wall, a steep faux-rocky slope, is accented with green hobby turf. In the forefront

Mathieu Cardin. *What the Frog's Eye Tells the Frog's Brain*, 2020. Partial installation view. Photo: Michel Brunelle.



are more false boulders and a few fake but artful plants, including a ceramic aloe vera. On a brown garden-mulch floor is a discarded soft-drink cup printed with a logo: John Frum's burgers.

At head height, a video monitor plays a live feed of some more rocks and a holed skull. Near the camera source—a little campfire tableau situated on the floor around the corner—is a black spear (which, we presume, pierced said skull) in a Plexiglas vitrine. The visitor may notice that the video feed (like that of every video in *Frog's Eye*) is date-stamped the next day. When I visited, on February 14, the stamp read 2020-02-15, a coy if impossible assurance that what's here today will also be here tomorrow.

A nearby, waist-level maquette displays false rocks cropping up out of a little bubbling sea obscured by swirling machine-made fog. The scene seems conceived for cinema—and indeed, a camera points downward at one rocky protrusion. Around the corner, the same outcrop appears on a flat-screen monitor, presented as though shot from the side: a steep, foggy mountain slope. The view recalls suspense-enhancing studio effects from old black-and-white thrillers—the island fogs in the 1933 version of *King Kong*, or the mountain-climbing scene in Sam Newfield's *Lost Continent* (1951)—wherein what is seen is always less vital than what isn't.

At last, the visitor passes, unchallenged, into a back room, as though for a behind-the-scenes peek. Here stands a round table, its top printed with a frog's eye logo—black pupil on orange iris. Two green uniform jackets with sewn-on patches sporting the same logo hang on hooks. A watercooler sits upon a stand, both pieces comically narrow as though sliced from a normally proportioned watercooler. A waist-high shelf displays a desk organizer, an Eico oscilloscope from MIT's legendary Building 20 (so the exhibition plan tells us) where Lettvin carried out his research, a small Lucite cube and a coffee mug printed with the word "Superflu" (French for "superfluous" or "unnecessary"). Low on another wall, a false louvre spray-painted in brown faux-stone suggests a vent, but is merely an ornament. A video monitor plays four feeds at once, from cameras positioned in this room and elsewhere in the exhibition, creating the sense of a paranoid yet exhilarating scavenger hunt.

This behind-the-scenes look yields but few answers. Indeed, *Frog's Eye* is not constructed for answers but to elicit questions: Why does a particular fake boulder keep popping up in new iterations? Why is the black spear protected in a vitrine, but not the skull staved in by it? Why should a louvred vent be ornamental? Where might I try John Frum's burgers? Our eyes make assumptions, run tests and draw provisional conclusions, as our brains struggle to catch up.

The stimuli to which the visitor responds are the tropes and tools of the museum curator's practice: the vitrine as a marker of significance, authority, preciousness; the diorama's unsettled, sometimes unsettling negotiations with realism; video's persuasive, cinematic sleight-of-hand. A constellation of items and objects arranged in an intra-referential knowledge system, recursively linked and layered to the point of unreadability, *Frog's Eye* is the museum devoted to exhibiting itself—amidst all this athletic play of eye and brain, something of a chilly playground.

As such, Cardin does take a swing at the reliability of human knowledge—historical, cultural, scientific—but the stakes here are more particular. *Frog's Eye* pushes us backward in time, as though into the mental and emotional world of a kind of collector that created the first modern museums, the *Wunderkammern* of the early Renaissance. For the earliest of those collections—rooted in the European appetite for far-flung marvel and adventure that would soon congeal into colonialism, but still untouched by the Enlightenment impulse to describe and explain—simply to marvel at the diverse yet incomprehensible wonders of God's creation comprised a sufficient response.

Centuries later, museums have become more complex and been enlisted in the service of scholarship and science. Yet no museum can be successful without what Stephen Greenblatt describes, in his essay "Resonance and Wonder," as the power "to evoke an exalted attention." The word for this attention is wonder, and, notwithstanding its many science-tinged markers, *Frog's Eye* certainly does evoke it. Moreover, although the object of our looking may be wonderful in its complexity, the act of looking at it is more complex, more wonderful still.

Thus, though *Frog's Eye* is certainly an impish exercise, it is not a cynical one; a certain marker of this is the absence of the commercial imperatives that seem to inhabit almost every 21st-century museum. There is no gift shop here—no \$35 "Superflu" mug in a pretty, printed cardboard box, no twelve-pack case of attractive Lucite cubes and no plasticized set of fake louvres to install about the home and office.

The result, and an amusing one I think, is that in situating itself in what is essentially a modernist idiom, and thus as an anachronism, the exhibition evinces a nostalgia for a bygone postwar, sci-tech modernist moment—you know, genuine MIT oscilloscopes and all that. *Frog's Eye* is a museological distillation of this vision, of a certain museum-going experience—an act of looking and exploring beholden to no corporate imperative or political interest, no commercial stratagem, not even an entry fee. Only the self—date-stamped for tomorrow in a spirit of hope—alive in the midst of an unknowable yet fascinating, beautiful world.

Edwin Janzen is a visual artist living in Montreal and working in installation, digital printmaking, video, drawing, artist books and other media. He completed his MFA at the University of Ottawa in 2010. Also, a contract editor and writer, Janzen has published articles in *Canadian Art*, *Border Crossings* and elsewhere, and has written and edited work for dozens of individual and institutional clients. He is currently working on an admittedly obsessive fan-writing project focused on *The Wire*, HBO's classic critical drama on the neoliberal American city.