The Curatorial Turn in the Darwin Year 2009

Julia Voss

In light of the highly productive Darwin Industry of recent decades it seemed unlikely that the Darwin Year (2009) would yield many new findings, let alone any substantial discoveries. What could be predicted was of course a plethora of symposia, books and papers. More unexpected, in my view, was that new insights were formulated in an entirely new medium: the exhibition. This surprising *curatorial turn* in Darwin scholarship materialized in numerous exhibitions, two of which are particularly noteworthy. 'Endless forms: Charles Darwin, Natural Sciences and the Visual Arts', curated by Jane Munro and Diana Donald, and Pamela Kort's 'Darwin: Art and The Search For Origins' both unearthed a rich visual culture surrounding evolutionary theory relevant both for the art historian and the historian of science. 'The Darwin Effect'[1], a term coined by American art historian Linda Nochlin to describe the immediate impact of Darwin's theory on certain artists, has turned out to be a broad phenomenon: from the most prominent proponents of Impressionism and Symbolism to less respected but commercially highly successful visual artists – the ramifications of evolutionary thought were everywhere to be seen. But what do I mean by 'curatorial turn'? The concept was used by Daniel Birnbaum, director of the 2009 Venice Biennale, to denote a recent interest in the exhibition as an alternative to the book by contemporary philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard and Bruno Latour.[2] It seems that the exhibition format can succeed where more traditional explorations in printed media have exhausted themselves. This is demonstrated by these two exhibitions.

Let us begin with the simple facts. Both exhibitions were well received by the public and reached a considerable audience: 'Darwin: Art and The Search For Origins' opened at the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt on 5 February and attracted 70,000 visitors within two months; 'Endless Forms. Charles Darwin, Natural Science and the Visual Arts' began at the Yale Center for British Art on 12 February and then travelled to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge where 115,000 visitors viewed it before it closed on 4 October.[3] The high attendance figures made it a record show in the history of the Fitzwilliam Museum as well as for the Yale Center. A book that would reach a comparable audience would be called a bestseller. The German, American and British

press wrote enthusiastic reports. The historian Harriet Ritvo, in her review in *Science*, called 'Endless Forms' a 'fascinating and spectacular exhibit' that would provide 'new answers and many new questions' to the layman as well as the specialist.[4] The *New York Times* described it as a 'remarkable exhibition' that demonstrates how 'our ways of seeing have evolved because of the power of his [Darwin's] vision'.[5] The *Daily Telegraph* voted it the 'Best Show of the Year' and the BBC ran a slide show on its website.[6] It even won the prestigious 2009 William M. B. Berger Prize for excellence in the field of British art history. In Germany, 'Darwin: Art and the Search for Origins' was featured in 'Tagesschau', Germany's most watched television evening news programme. It was also covered in a small series by the French/German television network 'Arte'. The weekly magazine *Spiegel* called it a 'thrilling show'[7] and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* pointed out that the show broke away from 'simply celebrating Darwin as an icon', commenting that 'the outstanding virtue of this show [is] that it makes visible the changing attitudes towards Darwin's work'.[8]

Both exhibitions overlapped in terms of their scope. They were devoted mainly to the nineteenth century, starting some years before the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859. The Frankfurt show also covered in two rooms the beginning of the twentieth century, ending with the Surrealist artist Max Ernst and his dark vision of history in the light of Darwinism. Both shows mixed two-dimensional displays (paintings, drawings, maps, book or journal illustrations, wallcharts) with three-dimensional displays (statues, sculptures, zoological and botanical specimens, and scientific instruments). Both blurred the borders between high art and popular culture. In Frankfurt Arnold Böcklin's monumental oil paintings were displayed with cuttings from the illustrated press [fig. 1]. In Cambridge one could move from works by the famous French Impressionists Cézanne, Monet and Degas to an overly decorated lady's fan from the 1870s. Although both exhibitions turned out to be a success it has to be pointed out that neither the richness and diversity of the displays nor the high attendance figures can be taken for granted. From a museum perspective, theme exhibitions are known to be difficult and much less attractive to the public than monographic exhibitions on well-known artists. Exhibiting only Monet or Cézanne means playing safe, while exhibiting works by the same artists as an aesthetic response to Darwin means taking a risk. Although one might argue that the power attached to Darwin's name is analogous to that of a prominent painter, the curators made clear in the exhibition panels that they did not provide a simple biographical account of his life but a thematic exploration of the reception of his work. That meant organising the

exhibits in new and different ways. Moreover, lenders such as museums and private collectors are more reluctant to give works of art to theme exhibitions. Monographic shows guarantee that a work is presented within the context of masterpieces and enhances its value. Theme shows might, to the contrary, surround a picture with ephemeral displays of popular culture. No matter how valuable the cultural or historical insight of these connections might be – in terms of prestige, it threatens the value of high art. Thus the lack of some artists in the shows on Darwin is telling as well. For instance, Gustav Klimt is known for being a vivid follower of the dispute on Darwinist themes around 1900.[9] Yet, none of the curators was able to obtain a work by Klimt for the shows in question.

The key question is in what way did the visual display help to reach new insights? What did the *curatorial turn* make us see that we did not see before? The first part of the answer is obvious. These exhibitions made available visual material that had been buried in archives and museum spaces since the nineteenth century, a fact that became clear to visitors on examination of small details such as framing and provenance. In Frankfurt, for example, Léon Maxime Faivre's painting *Deux mères* from 1888, showing a cave woman and a cave bear fighting for their offspring's survival, hung in a rather awkward-looking wooden archival frame suggesting that it was previously stored but not displayed in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and did not take part in the grand narrative of art history told in the museum rooms. The same disclosure was evident from the exhibition tags of Gabriel von Max's paintings. Although highly visible in the nineteenth century, Max's paintings of anthropomorphic monkeys were not collected by museums but by private individuals. With the notable exception of the *Kunstrichter* [fig. 2] the majority's provenance was labelled 'private collection'. Again, a successful artist was written out of history as he failed to enter the art institutions that guarantee an artist's afterlife. In Frankfurt not only Max's painting reentered the public stage but also his huge and long forgotten scientific collection, consisting of objects from anthropology, ethnology and natural history. Max was a correspondent of the German evolutionist Ernst Haeckel and provided him with one of the earliest representations of primeval man. Haeckel had Max's oil painting *Pithecanthropus alalus*, also displayed in Frankfurt, hanging in his study.[10]

Yet, there is more to an exhibition than the discovery of paintings and objects. Let us come back to the question of the curatorial turn. It seems noteworthy that it was a sociologist of science, Bruno Latour, who has turned most prominently to the exhibition format in recent years. Like the organisers of the Darwin exhibitions, Latour chose an art institution, the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, for two

exhibitions that dealt with the history and sociology of science.[11] But why was science introduced to an art institution? What were the advantages? How did an art institution influence a show on a scientific theory? First, the visual effect is simple but strong – the viewer's perspective and understanding change substantially. Whereas a visitor of a science museum expects to learn facts, the art museum goer expects to experience an individual encounter and a reflection of a theme. Science museums are factual; art museums are about views and how things change. The same object takes on a different meaning if it is in a natural history/science museum than if it is in an art museum. Thus a taxidermic group like John Hancock's *Struggle with the Quarry* would, if placed in a natural history museum, simply illustrate the notion of the war of nature [fig. 3]. In an art museum, however, it broaches the issue of the war of nature rather than illustrating it. Treated as if it was an artwork its aesthetic quality becomes visible as it becomes obvious that it needs interpretation. Two very different museological traditions have effectively shaped two different ways of seeing. Whereas the visitor of a science museum is used to learning by looking at objects, the visitor of an art museum is used to reflecting on the objects displayed. The active gaze of the latter turns out to be a surprising aid to a cultural reading of science. Framed in an art museum and embodied by multiple objects, scientific theories display their multilayered identities. They start to oscillate between art and science, fact and fiction. Generations of science historians and science sociologists have painstakingly argued for blurred borders of culture and science. The simple act of putting a scientific theory into an art space does just that very efficiently.

Moreover, it seems clear to me that the visual juxtapositions possible in an exhibition helped to throw substantially new light on issues we all thought had been fully explored. The Frankfurt exhibition guided the spectator through a maze-like corridor, allowing for a highly productive zig-zag view, and a departure from traditional categorising. Thus Symbolist works of art that art historians traditionally have seen as dealing primarily with classical mythology suddenly emerged as clearly relevant for an early reception of evolutionary theory. Art epochs such as 'Symbolism' or 'Historicism' could be just as rightfully called 'Darwinism'. In Frankfurt the visitor walked into a cabinet room with its entrance flanked by two of Jean Carriès' sculptures which could just as easily inhabit a Gothic cathedral as the prehistoric past [fig. 3]. Having entered the room the visitor would be surrounded by Odilon Redon's lithographs with their half human, half organic creatures. Leaving again, the viewer would bump into Böcklin's paintings of sea-dwelling organisms bearing a human body and a fish tail. These have

usually been interpreted as an outcome of the artist's readings of Nietzsche and ancient mythology. Yet, there was a far more obvious reason to ponder upon the human-fish form: evolutionary theory. For the nineteenth-century spectator, Böcklin's paintings evoked a hybrid world that had been called into being in the course of the debate on origins following Darwin's writings. Thus when Böcklin's half creatures were criticized for not conforming to classical iconography, Carus Sterne, a popular German science writer and devoted supporter of Ernst Haeckel, defended them on the grounds of their fidelity to evolutionary theory claiming 'reality has long surpassed phantasy'.[12] What had motivated Böcklin is less clear, since he rarely commented on his work, nor did he leave a diary or detailed letters. For the exhibition's purposes, however this context of production is less relevant than the context of reception. The Frankfurt show was not concerned with tracing the intellectual influences of Darwinian theory on particular artists, but rather with reconstructing the wider visual culture in which both German art and science were embedded.

There are several reasons why the aesthetic impact of evolutionary theory has not received full attention in previous research.[13] On the one hand, art historians interested in the nineteenth century and the rise of the avant-garde have been little inclined to include popular art in their research. Art from the Salon as well as animal painting has been considered to be in bad taste by scholars, and this has led to an astonishing reversal. The most popular painters of their time – like Edwin Landseer in England or Gabriel von Max in Germany – are often the least studied. Of equal importance is that most historians of science have been more interested in the moment of discovery than in the multiple ways scientific theories have reached a larger audience. As James A. Secord has pointed out, the reasons why a certain theory spreads should be as thoroughly studied as why a certain theory was formulated.[14] Yet, particularly popular images were suspected to distort evolutionary theory.[15] The fact that these images productively contribute to the wide success of Darwin's thought has been less acknowledged. Thinking with the eye was not something alien to Darwin. To the contrary, as I have shown in my book, *Darwin's Pictures. Views of Evolutionary Theory, 1837-1874* (2007/2010), Darwin himself sketched out his theory visually over and over again and also relied on book illustrations when he presented it to the public. Regarding reception, it was Janet Browne who first drew attention to pictures such as caricatures as vehicles rather than obstacles for the diffusion of evolutionary theory.[16] Given Darwin's own familiarity and engagement with popular artists and illustrators, it is perhaps not remarkable that he followed the broad reception of

his theory by collecting newspaper clippings and caricatures without worrying about mistakes and misunderstandings too much. In fact, although historians of science have repeatedly pointed out how Ernst Haeckel's or Thomas Henry Huxley's views differed from Darwin's theory of evolution, Darwin himself never corrected any of his followers. He would discuss differences in letters. However, as long as a colleague wrote in support, no matter how different his views were, Darwin felt no urge to insist on his specific view. He was obviously less sensitive to distortion than the scholars who studied him after his death. If every scientist had his version of evolutionary theory, every artist produced a different view as well. This astounding variety of ways of seeing is displayed in the multitude of different sources included in the exhibitions: books, newspapers, wall charts, caricatures, paintings, illustrations. What struck me most was the recurrence of mythological themes, starting from Böcklin's fauns, mermaids and serpents up to Faivre's wrestlers and mothers. Similar to the way that classical mythology had been rendered in an infinite number of variations, Darwinism has provided a point of departure for artists and makers of images. In fact, his theory, on the level of images, seems fully compatible with the topoi of mythological narratives such as rivalry, jealousy, motherhood, and heroism. Like myths they also claimed a universal truth; the behaviour of cavemen was considered as archetypical as that of ancient heroes. It would seem that Darwin thus provided a new mythology which replaced, combined or redefined gods and monsters with or as cavemen, dinosaurs and hairy apes.

Whilst children in the first half of the nineteenth century learned moral lessons with the help of imagery taken from Greek sagas, after 1859 their imagination was also stimulated by evolutionary schemes showing dinosaurs and others fighting for survival. No doubt, this remains the case today – all the way up to the production of *Jurassic Park*. Far from occupying only the layman's vision of prehistory, these images have often been deeply impressed on the scientist's mind. When asked who had had the greatest influence on his thinking, the American evolutionary biologist and paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould gave the following answer: 'If one seeks the name of the person most responsible for our usual sense, our everyday "feel", of the nature, status, beauty, strangeness, and fascination of prehistoric life [. . .] that person is [. . .] not Darwin or any other biological theorist or naturalist. Indeed, the name of that person remains largely unknown or little regarded [. . .] because we honor writers of text, while makers of image tend to remain anonymous. That man is Charles R. Knight'.[17] Gould expressed this judgment in the introduction to a new edition of a children's book, Charles R. Knight's *Life through the*

Ages, which had first appeared in 1946 and told the story of 1,500 million years of evolution in pictures. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the author and illustrator, born in 1874, had painted large murals in the American Museum of Natural History in New York and the Field Museum in Chicago. His tireless and productive efforts in a whole variety of media were mainly responsible for the entry of prehistoric times into American children's experiences of childhood.

For me, the greatest merit of the exhibitions was how they evoked the multitude of narratives that sprang from evolutionary theory. It is a very different story from the one told by neo-Darwinists. Traditionally, Darwin's theory is viewed as a clash between science and religion. In the midst of the large scale mythological paintings dominating the exhibitions we come to understand that, in contrast, evolutionary theory draws from its powerful resonance with existing cultural themes. In Cambridge and Frankfurt one could meet the myths of modern times: gods, heroes and fallen angels in the guise of dinosaurs, cavemen and hairy apes. So, reverting to the initial question: What makes the exhibition superior to the book in this case? Firstly, the auratic presence of the original often large-scale paintings make a much more powerful impression on the viewer. Printed in a book as a small reproduction the mythological dimension of the same picture is definitely tamed. Secondly, the plurality of evolutionary theory is mirrored by the plurality of possible paths through the exhibition. While the book tells a story in a linear way, the exhibition opens up a broad range of possibilities to combine, juxtapose and reflect on the objects on display. Moreover, the objects profit from being presented in an art institution where visitors are accustomed to reflecting on different ways of seeing and oscillating meanings. That is what seems to me the most surprising insight of the curatorial turn in the Darwin year. The most efficient way to bring out the kaleidoscope of evolutionary theory is to treat it just like an artwork. Put it on a pedestal and install it in the art museum's white cube!

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[1] Linda Nochlin, 'The Darwin effect. Evolution and Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture', *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, 2.2 (2003) <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/spring03index/186> [accessed 23 April 2010].

[2] See Daniel Birnbaum and Sven-Olov Wallenstein, "Thinking Philosophy, Spatially" in Joseph Backstein, Birnbaum and Wallenstein (eds.) *Thinking Worlds. The Moscow Conference on Philosophy, Politics, and Art*, Berlin/New York, 2008, pp. 123-145.

[3] At the Fitzwilliam over 90,000 visitors were counted, a record for the museum (the nearest comparison, with nearly 80 000 visitors, was an exhibition of illuminated manuscripts from Cambridge collections in 2007,which lasted around six weeks longer). At the Yale Center for British Art 25,000 people came to see the exhibition making it one of the institution's top shows ever as well and bumping up its overall attendance by 10 per cent in 2009.

[4] Harriet Ritvo, 'The Darwinian Eye', *Science*, 323 (2009), 1673-4.

[5] Edward Rothstein, 'Darwin's Wake Splashed Artists, Too', *The New York Times*, 2nd March (2009) <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/03/arts/design/03muse.html?_r=1> [accessed 23 April 2010].

[6] Richard Dorment, 'Endless Forms: Charles Darwin at the Fitzwilliam Museum', *Daily Telegraph*, (22 June 2009).

[7] Mathias Schreiber, 'Anschlag auf die Wirklichkeit', *Spiegel*, (2 February 2009), <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-63947545.html> [accessed 23 April 2010]

[8] Cord Riechelmann, 'Darwinismus ist eine Kunstepoche', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, (5 February 2009), <http://www.faz.net/s/Rub4DCBF6856807485AAEAE3AF18F229847/Doc~EF7E482847DE74274B3AA6313A357AEA1~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html> [accessed 23 April 2010].

[9] Marsha Morton, 'Natur and Soul: Austrian Responses to Haeckel's Evolutionary Monism', in *Darwin Art and the Search for Origins*, at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, ed. by Pamela Kort and Max Hollein (Köln: Wienand Verlag, 2009), pp. 126-153.

[10] Michael Tellenbach, Marion Jourdan, Gaelle Rosendahl, Wilfried Rosendahl, 'Gabriel von Max and his "Scientific Collection" ', in *Darwin Art and the Search for Origins*, at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, ed. by Pamela Kort and Max Hollein (Köln: Wienand Verlag, 2009), pp. 188-211.

[11] The two exhibitions were 'Iconoclash: Beyond the image wars in science, religion and art' and 'Making things public: The atmospheres of democracy'.

[12] Pamela Kort, 'Arnold Böckling, Max Ernst, and the debate around origins and survivals in Germany and France', in *Darwin Art and the Search for Origins*, pp. 24-53, here p. 27.

[13] There are, of course, exceptions such as the already mentioned Linda Nochlin, see footnote 2. See also Jonathan Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[14] James A. Secord, 'Halifax keynote address: Knowledge in Transit', *Isis* 95 (2004), 654–672.

[15] See for instance Stephen J. Gould, 'Ladders and Cones: Constraining Evolution by Canonical Icons', in *Hidden Histories of Science*, ed. by Robert B. Silvers (New York: New York Review of Science 1995), pp. 37-67.

[16] Janet Browne, 'Darwin in Caricature. A Study in the Popularization and Dissemination of Evolution', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 145 (2001), 496-509.

[17] Charles R. Knight, *Life through the Ages*, with a new foreword by Stephen Jay Gould (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), viii. On Knight, see also W. J. T. Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book: The Life and Times of a Cultural Icon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 141–44.