

## Mark Dion

(New Bedford, USA, 1961)

From an early age, Mark Dion cultivated an authentic interest in biology, entomology, and museums of natural history. Initially his focus on a growing body of information about damages connected to the exploitation of the earth's resources found concrete form in works that were explicitly and didactically ecological in approach, about the destruction of tropical forests. But the installations at natural history museums and the way they represent knowledge through the arrangement of objects and specimens soon emerged as his preponderant interest. This approach has allowed the artist to examine systems of scientific knowledge and their museum displays from a Foucauldian viewpoint, that is, in terms of an analysis of conservative cultural practices of power.

One of the criticisms the artist has openly expressed of present-day museum institutions is that they have triggered a radical mutation, from their original educational role to one of entertainment, with a consequent decline in scientific content in favor of pampering museum-goers, who are increasingly treated like children in a theme park. This change also explains the conspicuous presence of fake animal specimens in some of Dion's work: stuffed animals that soften and domesticate the features of species to turn them into gentle toys. Walt Disney puppets likewise appear, and their imaginary world, populated by little animals, is, for Dion, the paradigmatic example of how man can look at nature not in order to understand it, but to replace it with his own hygienic and sentimentally convenient version, over which he maintains full control, just like the conquerors of indigenous populations.

*La Fontaine*, 2007, is an installation composed of elements that are typical of his work, such as shipping crates and barrels, which he has used since his earliest work, as images of an economy that exploits the earth. Equally characteristic are animals—stuffed or kept in cases—a basic element of museum exhibition language. The title, however, reconfigures the objects' context, connecting the domain of scientific classification to the literary world of La Fontaine, who in the seventeenth century revived the moralistic use of animal fables that had been developed earlier by Aesop. The fox and the crow, present in Dion's work, are some of La Fontaine's most famous figures.

Many of the components of *La Fontaine* fully depict the survival of the fittest, according to a view that seems to stigmatize the rules of power, and for this reason Dion is able to represent, with his animal allegories, a universe that is parallel and contrary to Walt Disney's toxically sugar-coated realm. (EV)