

**Projects 82 : Mark Dion : rescue  
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of Modern Art : the Museum of Modern  
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[Roxana Marcoci]**

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index of participating artists.



projects **82** mark dion

rescue archaeology:  
a project for  
the museum of modern art

**The Museum of Modern Art**

November 20, 2004–March 14, 2005

**In 1932, three years after its founding** in 1929 by Lillie P. Bliss, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, and Mary Quinn Sullivan, The Museum of Modern Art moved from its rented galleries in the Heckscher Building on Fifth Avenue to 11 West 53rd Street, a limestone townhouse owned by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. To house its ever expanding collection, the Museum's first permanent building, designed in the International Style by Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone, went up on this site in 1939. The previous year, two townhouses to the immediate north, on West 54th Street, had been demolished to provide the land for the Museum's sculpture garden. Of these, the one at 4 West 54th Street—a four-story brownstone with a two-story carriage house and a central garden—had belonged to John D. Rockefeller, Sr. At the time of its demolition, three of its Victorian-style rooms were disassembled and donated to The Museum of the City of New York while a Moorish room was given to the Brooklyn Museum. The other, at 10 West 54th Street, had belonged to Abby and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Designed by William Welles Bosworth, the nine-story building contained a gallery for modern art on the seventh floor and displays of earlier European paintings, statuary, and Chinese porcelains throughout.



Since the inauguration of the sculpture garden, in 1939, the foundations of these dwellings have remained largely undisturbed, despite the Museum's subsequent renovations and growth. In 2000, in preparation for the Museum's most extensive rebuilding project yet, the garden was temporarily disassembled and the land was excavated to a depth of fifteen feet. In October of that year, artist Mark Dion performed a series of archaeological digs, recovering a pillar and fragments of the limestone foundation from the nine-story townhouse. A month later he scavenged again in the garden, as well as in the hollowed-out brownstones adjoining the Museum to the west and in the newly demolished Dorset Hotel. His findings included historical artifacts such as cornices, moldings, shards of ceramic and glass, sections of fireplace mantels, wallpaper pieces, and bricks from distinct phases of the Museum's expansion, as well as more recent ephemera, including the remains of Bruce Nauman's *Audio-Visual Underground Chamber* (1972–74), which was installed in the garden as part of the artist's 1995 retrospective. The digs confirmed that sub-surface deposits not associated with the Rockefeller family's period of residence were also extant. This was not surprising, since the garden had served as the construction site for a number of projects over the years, from Buckminster Fuller's *Dymaxion Deployment Unit* (1942) and Marcel Breuer's *Demonstration House* (1949) to Rirkrit Tiravanija's child-sized glass pavilion (1997) and Piotr Uklański's dance floor (2000).

Dion has conducted a number of archaeological projects over the last decade: he dredged a Venetian canal for *Raiding Neptune's Vault: A Voyage to the Bottom of the Canals and Lagoon of Venice* (1997–98); combed the banks of the River Thames on the sides of both the old Tate (Millbank) and the new (Bankside) for *Tate Thames Dig* (1999); and investigated his own cultural backyard, Massachusetts, for *New England Digs* (2001). In each case his work was divided into three phases: the actual dig; the cleaning and cataloguing of the finds; and the display of artifacts in treasure cabinets. Unlike bona fide archaeological digs, Dion's excavations have no real scientific value. Instead, his approach to gathering, ordering, and displaying

is designed to probe the underlying taxonomic systems of museums and the narratives that their collections construct. What is an important artifact? Who determines the context in which it is displayed? How is it used to tell a story? These are some of the questions raised by Dion's work. Drawing on 1970s aesthetics such as, on the one hand, Robert Smithson's dialectical rapport between "sites" and "non-sites," and on the other, Marcel Broodthaers's fictional museum displays, Dion underscores the fact that the story told by a collection is only a partial one. His questioning is thus part of a process of opening art up to a broader field of critical debate.

*Rescue Archaeology: A Project for The Museum of Modern Art* is among Dion's most focused ventures, being intricately linked to the founding and history of the Museum. Yet despite its documentary makeup, the project is infused with an element of fantasy. A series of six fireplace mantels, for instance, salvaged from the brownstones adjacent to the Museum and fully restored by the artist, are intended to refer to the living room of Abby and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., renowned for its warmth and intimacy. A custom-made cabinet presents objects cleaned and classified not by scientific criteria but by the artist's logic; visitors are invited to peruse its contents and appreciate its odd organizational paradigms. Finally, a functional laboratory and a group of photographs recording Dion's behind-the-scenes archaeological "performance," as he calls it, reveal an interest in experimentation and process that balances his investment in the finished product. It is fitting that an artist who acts as both performer and archaeologist should link the site of production with that of display, making the material remains buried beneath the Museum's garden and in its environs the subject of his study. Conceiving an installation about the Museum's foundations within its new building, Dion ascertains a direct link between the house of modernism and the world around it.

Roxana Marcoci  
Assistant Curator  
Department of Photography



Mark Dion. *Rescue Archaeology: A Project for The Museum of Modern Art*. 2000–2004. Cover and this page, left and top: Dion digging in the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden at The Museum of Modern Art, October 2000. Photos: Roxana Marcoci. Above: cleaning an artifact from the dig in Dion's laboratory in Beach Lake, Pa., 2004. Photo: Mark Dion. Opposite: artifacts from the dig. Photos, top: Mark Dion, bottom: Bob Braine. Last page: artifacts from the dig. Photos: Bob Braine



## Interview with David Rockefeller, Chairman Emeritus of The Museum of Modern Art, April 8, 2004

By Mark Dion and Roxana Marcoci

**Roxana Marcoci:** In October 2000, when The Museum of Modern Art had converted the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden into a staging area for the construction of its new building, we invited Mark to perform a series of archaeological excavations.

**David Rockefeller:** I see. You were actually here at the time the garden was dismantled.

**Mark Dion:** The process of archaeology I employed in this excavation was not precise or measured, but rather was a kind of rescue archaeology. The site was already disrupted, the context of stratification lost. I would like to ask you a few questions about your experience of the childhood house, which is a somewhat similar approach to the history of this place. We cannot assemble a detailed reconstruction of the space from the artifacts found, nor can we from memory, but I am trying to get a sense of the structure from fragments of material culture as well as fragments of experience.

**RM:** Could you share some of your memories of what it was like growing up in the townhouse at 10 West 54th Street?

**DR:** The house had nine floors. On the rooftop there was a protective wire. The floor was tiled. One could ride a tricycle around. As a child I would be sent out to get air and exercise on the roof. Grandfather's house was next door at 4 West and between them there was an open space that had a concrete floor laid with curved edges so it could be flooded with water. At one point we used it as a skating rink.

**MD:** Do you have any particular recollection of colors when you think of the house?

**DR:** It was limestone color.

**MD:** What about the interiors? I almost would like to think impressionistically in terms of the old house. What was it like growing up there? I have just so few things to go on and I am very curious about imagining the layout of the house and the use of space.

**DR:** Maybe it would be helpful if I gave you a sense of what happened on different floors. The entrance hall had a staircase with rather low-marble steps. On the westerly side was Mother's sitting room, where she had the famous Chinese figure that is now at Kykuit [the Rockefeller estate in the Hudson Valley]. Across the foyer was Father's study. On the second floor there were sixteenth-century Polonaise rugs made in Iran—beautiful Persian rugs from royal families in Poland, which are now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Also on the second floor there was a large drawing room, a very formal room used for special functions, where my sister was married. Father had all around the room a number of K'ang Hsi porcelains that stood on big stands and also quite good eighteenth-century French furniture and Isfahan rugs.

**MD:** You would certainly not have wanted to take your tricycle in that room.

**DR:** No, that would not have been encouraged. But that room was used rather infrequently. Next to it was the music room with the pipe organ. The organ had three levels of keys. Mr. Archard Gibson was the organist. He was kind to young people and I used to enjoy sitting on the

bench beside him, watching him play. I enjoyed watching his feet. This room had some marvelous Italian paintings—works by Duccio (of which very few are left in the world), Botticelli, and Piero della Francesca. The collection also included a full-length portrait of Lady Dysart by Sir Thomas Lawrence. The dining room was at the opposite end. It too was a formal room and had Chinese porcelains all around. On the third floor at the northern end were the library, my parents' bedroom, and their dressing rooms, with a bathroom in-between. The rooms of my brothers Nelson and John and my sister Abby were on the fourth floor. Those of my two other brothers Laurance and Winthrop were on the fifth floor. My room too was on the fifth floor looking south over the city.

**RM:** What was in your room?

**DR:** I had a number of watercolors by Arthur Davies. Mother put them in my room as a child and I always liked them and so when I got married she gave them to me and I still have them. The modern art gallery was on the seventh floor at the southern end: Donald Deskey designed the furniture.

**MD:** It must have been such an amazing space to negotiate as a child.

**DR:** That's true. It was a wonderful way for us to learn about art.

**RM:** If there was an object you would have liked to see uncovered during the diggings that Mark made, what would it have been?

**DR:** Any pieces would probably be too small—I don't think it likely that there would have been objects, because all the valuable sculptures or furnishings would have been removed. Maybe some fireplaces survived.

**MD:** We recovered a number of fireplaces from the adjacent brownstones. We certainly found a lot of limestone and some marble. We have some very distinctive green tile that we recovered, a little bit of flooring. Very little wood fragments survived, a bit of molding.



**DR:** This is not surprising. Certainly the ground floor as I recall it was largely marble. If you went straight across from 54th Street in the direction of 53rd Street there was a door that led into the housekeeper's office. The secretaries ate there. When I was young and the family had guests I would eat with the housekeepers in the dining room. The household was on the sixth floor. At some point there was a squash court on one of the top floors. Also, every Saturday we would go over the weekly accounts with Father in his

study. He asked us to keep a record of everything we received and spent. If there was a discrepancy between the two, we would note that as "unaccounted for."

**MD:** Maybe that's what I'll find when I start sifting through the material, an unaccounted nickel or dime. If your records are excellent we could still go back and balance the books.

**RM:** You have grown up amidst works of art from different periods and geographical areas. In addition, you are a passionate collector of beetles. What does collecting mean to you?

**DR:** I guess it gave me an interest in a great number of things, from works of art to biological works of nature.

**MD:** Do you have a favorite family of beetles?

**DR:** Probably the longhorns, they are the most colorful.

**MD:** Yes, the harlequin beetles.

**RM:** When did you start collecting them?

**DR:** I started collecting them when I was ten, and that would have been in 1925.

**RM:** The Museum of Modern Art was cofounded by your mother in 1929. In 1948 you took her seat on the Museum's Board of Trustees. What was your mother's role in shaping your understanding of modern art?

**DR:** She played a very important role because she loved beauty in general, whether it was in nature or manmade. My own interest in both certainly began with her.

**RM:** The concept of museums has changed in the last seventy-five years. As Chairman Emeritus and Life Trustee of MoMA, how do you see the new museum, and what role do you think it should play in the twenty-first century?

**DR:** The Museum's original basic concept—that of showing the best works of art being done by contemporary artists all over the world—still constitutes its objective today. It is a very broad objective.

**MD:** We have on one side the Museum's responsibility of showing and preserving modern works and on the other that of promoting contemporary works. The modern period is no longer contemporary. The distance between Monet



and the contemporary generation is now significant. In other words, the Museum now has two roles.

**DR:** That's true, and obviously it becomes more difficult because so much has been done in terms of acquisitions. The Museum owns so much that even with the doubling of space we will probably not be able to show more than 10 percent of its collection at any one time. The collection needs to be in constant rotation.

**MD:** That was certainly the founding spirit of the Museum—pushing ideas, bringing about and supporting challenging art, making it available to the public.

**DR:** And that continues to be its major interest, along with maintaining the collection of masterworks of the modern movement.



## biography

Mark Dion was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and lives in Beach Lake, Pennsylvania.

## selected exhibitions

Mark Dion's work has been featured in a wide range of solo and group exhibitions around the world. His recent shows include the São Paulo Bienal (2004); *Universal Collection*, at the Historisches Museum, Frankfurt (2004); *The Ichthyosaurus, the Magpie, and Other Marvels of the Natural World*, at the Musée Gassendi and the Réserve Géologique de Haute Provence, Digne, and the Centro Sperimentale per le Arti Contemporanee, Caraglio (2003); *Full House*, at the The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Conn., where it won the Ninth Annual Larry Aldrich Foundation Award (2003); *Mark Dion: Encyclomania*, at the Villa Merkel, Esslingen, the Kunstverein Hannover, and the Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn (2002); *Microcosmographia*, at the University of Tokyo Museum (2002); *Urban Wildlife Observation Unit* (a project of the Public Art Fund), Madison Square Park, New York (2002); *New England Digs*, at the Fuller Museum of Art, Brockton, Mass., the David Wynton Bell Art Gallery, Brown University, Providence, R.I., and the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth (2001); *Ecologies*, The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago (2000); the Carnegie International 99/00, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pa. (1999); *Tate Thames Dig*, Tate Gallery of Modern Art, London (1999); and the Nordic Pavilion, 47th Venice Biennale (1997).

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