Jan Švankmajer's Kunstkammer: Every thing means everything

Anna Brzezińska-Winkiel

Faculty of Letters, University of Wrocław
pl. Nankiera 15b, 50-140 Wrocław, Poland
E-mail address: brzezinska.ann@gmail.com
ORCID number: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2829-4023

Abstract

Thesis. Jan Švankmajer's *Kunstkammer* is a project with a complex constellation of meanings that should be analyzed primarily in the individual and subjective context and with reference to the tenets of surrealism and theories of things.

Discussed concepts. The paper describes the kunstkammer art project created by Jan Švankmajer, a Czech surrealist, in the context of Pomian's theory of semiophores. Author also compares the Švankmajer's art project to traditional and historical equivalents, using the concepts of micro- and macrocosm, the world as a stage (*Theatrum Mundi*), hermeticism, and alchemy.

Results and conclusion. Švankmajer's *Kunstkammer* contains found objects that function as semiophores and refers to the 16th-century idea of knowledge as interpretation.

Originality. Švankmajer's *Kunstkammer* has not yet been extensively discussed, especially within the context of surrealism as a reflection on aesthetics and Pomian's theory of semiophores.

Keyw ords: Jan Švankmajer, kunstkammer, surrealism, Krzysztof Pomian, semiophores, cabinet of curiosities

Introduction

Jan Švankmajer is a contemporary Czech surrealist, who lives and creates his works in Prague. He is a member of a group of surrealists, whose history and traditions reach back to interwar avant-garde. Švankmajer worked together with Eva Švankmajerová, his wife, up until her death in 2005. He is best known internationally for his films. Early in his career, he created short films, such as *Food (Jídlo,* 1992) and *Dimension of Dialogue* (*Možnosti dialogu*, 1982); since the late 80s, however, his focus shifted to feature films. His most notable works from this period include *Alice* (*Něco z Alenky,* 1988), *Lesson Faust* (*Lekce Faust*, 1994), *Conspirators of Pleasure* (*Spiklenci slasti*, 1996), *Little Otik (Otesánek*, 2000), *Lunacy* (*Šílení,* 2005), *Surviving Life* (*Přežít svůj život*, 2010), and *Insects* (*Hmyz,* 2018). Jan Švankmajer is also a visual artist, sculptor, drawer, writer, puppet

designer, and photographer; his works are rarely limited to only one form of art, often combining several different forms into a single project. Švankmajer is also known for his plays – he started his theatrical work with the puppet theatre, which has a long and rich history in the Czech Republic. He also wrote and designed plays and created puppets for his own performances and films (Schmitt, 2012).

Kunstkammer as a lifelong project

Kunstkammer is Švankmajer's lifelong project, on which he worked together with his wife. It has been in continuous development since the 60s and 70s in their country residence in Horní Staňkov. *Kunstkammer* is a diverse collection of objects that fall into categories traditionally found in 16th-century cabinets of curiosities. It was inspired by the collection kept at the Prague castle by Rudolf II (1552-1612). *Kunstkammer* can be divided into the following categories: *artificialia* (various art- and craftworks), *naturalia* (natural objects), *antiquitas* (antiques and ancient artefacts), *scientificia* (scientific objects and devices), and *mirabilia* (all kinds of curiosities) (Purš, 2012). Additionally, Švankmajer has expanded the scope of his art project with *funeralia* and *horribilia* (which include objects of African origin and 19th-century Czech reliquaries), *exotica* (for example, African masks and figurines), *esoterika* (*mirabilia* and *mistika*, including objects inspired by alchemical practices, fetishes created by Švankmajer, and *Mutus liber* – his wife's project), *etustissima* (private ceramics and antiques), *scientica* (a series of collages from *Švank-mayers Bilderlexikon*). The categories were to evoke the idea of the world as a stage (*Theatrum Mundi*) and to function as an encyclopaedia. They also had anthropological and cosmogonic functions, as they could be translated into the human macro- and microcosm in relation to the world and the cosmos (Purš, 2012). Furthermore, the collection is constantly being expanded, so an object can, with time, change its category or acquire a new one, belonging to several categories simultaneously (Švankmajer, 2018).

Švankmajer's *Kunstkammer* can be considered a unique collection in the sense that most of the objects that it comprises have not been discovered or uncovered (in the "traditional" surrealist way) but have been created by the artist himself. Švankmajer has been populating his *Kunstkammer* with works of art that resemble the objects originally found in kunstkammers by following the historical conventions of each category of such objects. For instance, he used bones and scraps of fur to create skeletons of nonexistent animals. He then named them in accordance with the biological nomenclature and put them into glass cabinets (e.g. *Insectivore, Crawling Fish, Pumpkin Beast*). Švankmajer is also known for his series of paintings inspired by Arcimboldo, which depict collages of human faces formed with bird, animal, or seashell figures. The *Švank-mayers Bilderlexikon* also includes collages of old maps with various parts of human anatomy marked on them (e.g. eyes, internal organs) (Purš, 2012).

The fact that Švankmajer identifies with surrealism is not only a matter of a certain type of aesthetics that he imposes on his works but also of a philosophy of life that he follows. In other words, Švankmajer is living by the principles of his own art, viewing surrealism as a form of self-therapy. This comes across in his art projects, which not only combine different visual arts but also convey a deeper meaning by drawing on myths and archetypes in a manner not dissimilar to psychoanalysis. Švankmajer's *Kunstkammer* is a unique project that conjures up four-hundred-year-old cabinets of curiosities not only in form but also in content. This paper compares Švankmajer's project against the original cabinets of curiosities and the kunstkammer created by emperor Rudolf II, and discusses the meaning of the project in the context of Krzysztof Pomian's theory of semiophores.

Cabinets of curiosities

First cabinets of curiosities were created in Europe in the 14th century, reaching a high point in the 16th and 17th century. Although their popularity started to dwindle after that time, the concept of a kunstkammer survived until the 18th century. The cabinets were a result of the "age of curiosity" – a desire (manifested in the culture of the time) to "reduce the universe to the scale of the human eye" (Pomian, 1990, p. 49) and to capture its meaning in an encyclopaedic fashion, which became possible thanks to the spread of the ideas of humanism and a new approach to ancient artefacts (their status changed from worthless remains of pagan cultures to objects of careful study). In Europe, the fashion of the time had a significant impact on the popularity of private collections arranged in the style of cabinets of curiosities. The number of collectors grew among popes and cardinals, but also on imperial and royal courts, and among the members of lower social classes, i.e. lawyers, monks, doctors, scholars, and artists (Pomian, 1990). Cabinets of curiosities exhibited objects that were considered strange, wonderful, unusual, and exotic. Those created in the 15th century included predominantly various zoological specimens, especially those of mythical origins, such as unicorn horns, griffin claws, and griffin eggs, many of which were also decorated with jewels and silver or gold fittings. Relics of saints or wondrous gemstones were also frequently exhibited as parts of the collections. In the past, the objects performed a magical function: they blessed the owner with good fortune and fertility or warded off diseases, such as gout (Daston 1998). In the 16th century, mummified or otherwise preserved remains and skeletons became particularly coveted objects to include in one's collection. Their value was further increased if they exhibited any anatomical abnormalities. Some kunstkammers displayed stones that were formed in the shape of a human body. The *naturalia* also included plants and herbs, animal parts, such as horns or hooves (especially those harvested from exotic species), and fossils. All these objects were collected not only for entertainment purposes; gradually, they also became the focus of scholarly inquiry (Daston, 1998).

Most frequently, the objects in the cabinets were organized according to the traditional categories; however, the exact arrangement of each collection was individually determined by the collector, who decided what to include in the collection, how to categorize each object (sometimes creating new categories), and whether to put the collection on display. Thus, the collector took on the role of the creator or demiurge of their part of the world; this is how Rudolf II designed his kunstkammer (Purš, 2012).

According to Purš, cabinets of curiosities not only represent a snapshot of the world but also reflect a rich, underlying philosophy. The humanistic turn towards all that is human paved the way for the creation of kunstkammers in the hermetic philosophy, which showed humankind and the cosmos as mutual forces in the concept of the so-called *spiritus mundi* - a unity between the human spirit and the cosmos. Furthermore, kunstkammers were a result of the Renaissance approach towards cosmology, in which the cosmos was conceptualized as having a spirit that binds everything together, with only a part of it being imbued into every human. The idea of an astral body, which comes from the cosmos but is impure and thus has to take the form of a mortal coil, can be used to explain the Renaissance approach to imagination and magic. The combination of magic with imagination becomes possible thanks to the spirit that encompasses the entire world and cosmos. Magic can also be seen in alchemical practices, which fascinated Švankmajer, as they were aligned with his view of imagination as the fundamental principle of artistic expression (Purš, 2012). Despite the clear references to alchemy and hermeticism, it should be noted that these concepts coincided with Švankmajer's approach to creating his artworks. Švankmajer portrays magic in his works of art with the use of his imagination, which for him is a "magic mirror that answers the most deeply hidden questions" (Purš, 2012, p. 208), and which anyone can use.

It should be noted that, at the time when the first kunstkammers were created, the ways of knowing the world and categorizing its manifestations—the order of the microcosm and the macrocosm—were based on finding the resemblances between the "sign[s] and what [they] signified" (Foucault, 2005, pp. 34). The role of humans was to decipher these signs, which may have been left behind by the ancients in their writings or by God in nature. In the 16th century thinking, science and magic were complementary. Interpretation became the method for acquiring new knowledge and deciphering information. In this view, there was nothing that could not be explained and the world was full of mysteries that were waiting to be discovered (Foucault, 2005).

ŠVANKMAJER'S *KUNSTKAMMER* PROJECT

The 16th-century belief that "the function proper to knowledge is not seeing or demonstrating; it is interpreting" (Foucault, 2005, p. 44) is also reflected in Švankmajer's artistic works and his ideas on micro- and macrocosm. His collection was created under the assumption that not every manifestation of the

world can be explained through science and the human condition holds secrets that can be uncovered through surrealism. Because art is the key to our subconsciousness, understanding the world is largely a matter of interpreting one's own self. The *Kunstkammer* is a product of Švankmajer's views, as it is, after all, an "individual" collection that was created through a lengthy process of personal selection, attribution of meaning, and cataloguing.

In his description of the ideas behind kunstkammers and museums, Švankmajer notes that museums are not, in fact, continuing the tradition of kunstkammers, but have rather replaced them with a different worldview. The purpose of the cabinets was to satisfy human curiosity by providing access to the unknown and the magical, while museums are exhibiting objects of science that present a rational and positivistic view of the world. Furthermore, there are two types of people, according to Švankmajer: those who follow the principle of pleasure and those who follow the principle of reality. He also claims that the world of imagination and magic is being repressed by the rational world of civilization. A surrealist project is thus a form of opposition, with the use of imagination, against consumerism, pragmatism, and utilitarianism of modern civilization. It is also a creative manifesto which shows the artist's affinity with imagination, rather than reason (Švankmajer, 2018). Švankmajer's cabinet of curiosities cannot be fully grasped within the limits of reason and scientism and is arranged according to the principle of analogy. The objects placed next to one another are connected by the intention of the collector and not by their monetary or aesthetic value. Various types of objects can find their home in Švankmajer's kunstkammer: natural objects, objects made by artists or artisans, but also works of primitive and erotic art. Their arrangement is governed solely by their magical purpose and the collector's imagination, which are to show the metaphorical nature of reality. Concepts such as productivity, usefulness or monetary value are abandoned (Švankmajer, 2018).

The way kunstkammers approach visitors is yet another characteristic that makes them different from museums. The primary goal of museums is to educate their visitors, which they try to accomplish not only in the narrow sense, i.e. by providing more information on what is being displayed, but also in a broad sense by enhancing the visitors' appreciation of the natural world. Art galleries additionally offer their visitors aesthetic experiences. In contrast, kunstkammers bring the visitors into a world of magic and the unknown to arouse their curiosity and, in a sense, initiate them. In this view, cabinets of curiosities strive to change the visitors' entire worldview rather than to simply educate them. The fact that kunstkammers have no monetary value (and frequently no sentimental value either) is best demonstrated by the fate that many of these collections had faced after the death of their collector. In exceptional cases, the entire kunstkammers have survived. Much more frequently, however, the valuable objects from the collection were donated to museums, while the rest was sold or put into warehouses (as was the case with the objects from André Bretona's, Rudolf II's, and *Hermína Srbová's collections)* (Švankmajer, 2018).

Similarities and differences between 16th and 17th--century cabinets of curiosities and Švankmajer's *Kunstkammer*

There are many similarities between Švankmajer's *Kunstkammer* and the cabinets created in the 16th and 17th century. First and foremost, it has a similar function: it is a unique collection, in which most of the artefacts on display are the only existing copies. The collection is a type of projection of the author's thoughts. Hence, the original cabinets showed not only a snapshot of the author's world but were also created according to their sense of style. Švankmajer's cabinet fulfils that role to an even greater extent – it is a form of self-therapy, revealing one of his most intimate experiences, e.g. his fetishes or his obsessions. *Kunstkammer* points to the secrets of the universe, thus showing that there is more to the world than its rational part, as nature can have its aberrations, be strange yet interesting, and that humans possess the key to magic and imagination. Imagination, which fuels human actions, constitutes a surrealist principle (*princip imaginace*), according to which anyone can become an artist because everyone possesses an imagination (Švankmajer, 2014).

With regard to contrasts, there is another difference in the way magic and hermeticism were perceived in the Renaissance and Baroque world and Švankmajer's current works, namely that the collection is not open to the general public (*Kunstkammer* was inspired by Rudolf II's unique collection, which was available only to those invited by the emperor himself). Photos of some of the objects created by Švankmajer for his kunstkammer can be found in books on his surrealist works. A part of *Kunstkammer* was also on display in the Museum Kampa in Prague during the *Naturalia* exhibition (2014-2015). Švankmajer's reason for not including captions for the exhibited objects was that the role of his collection is to stimulate creative thinking, not educate. He also noted that museums are objective, while his own collection is subjective and arranged according to the principle of analogy (Švankmajer, 2014).

The greatest difference, however, lies in the fact that the objects exhibited in the *Kunstkammer* have mostly been created by the owner of the collection – the artist himself. The status of the objects included in Švankmajer's modern cabinet of curiosities can be determined with Pomian's theory of semiophores.

Pomian's theory of semiophores

Pomian discusses the theory of semiophores in the context of 16th- and 17th-century collections, cabinets of curiosity and museums in his book *Collectors and curiosities* (1990). Pomian introduces two more concepts, namely *curieux* and *sciences curieuses*, which stand for a curious person who wants to learn the secrets of the world and "curious" or "vain" sciences respectively (Pomian, 1990). A *curieux* was a term used to describe people whose desire was

to acquire the rarest, most extraordinary of objects, without which a collection would not be complete and would not become a snapshot of the world. In the 17th century, the age of curiosity was gradually being replaced by scientific knowledge (Pomian, 1990).

According to Pomian, two domains, i.e. the visible and the invisible, developed when humans started using language (since the dawn of human communication those two domains could be named and described). He also distinguishes between two categories of objects: those that have some use and those that lack it. The first category refers to things that can somehow prove to be useful to humans, e.g. by being consumed, providing shelter against the elements, or by being crucial to survival in some other way. The other category includes objects that lack any pragmatic function but are assigned meaning. Their role is to turn the eyes of the viewer towards the invisible – they are to be viewed and contemplated. These objects undergo wear and tear more slowly (if at all) and are called semiophores (Pomian, 1990). Furthermore, an object, according to Pomian, cannot belong to both categories at the same time. It is either to be used or to be viewed. Even in rare cases, when it seems that something is both useful and meaningful, it becomes an object when used and a semiophore when put on display. Therefore, it does not belong to both categories simultaneously – the distinction is always a dichotomy. Moreover, the more meaning objects have, the less useful they appear to people. The key idea here is that the relationship between meaning and usefulness of an object is inversely proportional, i.e. the more meaning an object bears, the less it is used, and vice versa. Pomian also recognizes the category of scrap; scraps are neither useful nor meaningful (Pomian, 1990). The hierarchy of usefulness and meaning is most readily apparent in societies led by semiophore-men (representatives of the invisible: authority, power, God, wealth). At the bottom of the pyramid are thing-men, who are spared the fate of becoming scrap only thanks to their usefulness. Humans are constantly in flux, changing between being semiophores and being things, depending on the circumstances (Pomian, 1990).

Semiophores fulfil their function best when they become parts of a collection. In societies, semiophore-men surround themselves with semiophores. The higher these men are in the hierarchy, the more valuable are the meaningful objects that they surround themselves with. Pomian notes that this is particularly evident in societies, in which semiophores have such high value that they are not exchanged for semiophores of lesser value or money (Pomian, 1990).

According to Pomian, books and works of art belong to the invisible and it this their context (in case of books, the publishing market and the research on its functioning, an entire spectrum of professions involved with book reviews, readers) that transforms them into semiophores. In this view, "proper" reception of a literary text (i.e. reading it with understanding) makes it a semiophore because we have to reach for the invisible meaning of the text in the process. The same holds true for works of art, for which only the type of signs used to

signify their meaning changes to iconic while the way they function remains the same (Pomian, 1995).

Pomian's theory can be also considered in a different context (alongside some other theories, i.e. Peter Bürger's concepts, catalogue and poetic list by Umberto Eco, *anamorphosis* by Jurgis Baltrušaitis) as an important point in the discussion on the materiality-turn in modern humanities. The materiality-turn is a reflection on how objects and instruments function and how they are perceived – not only in everyday life but also in art and literature. Scholars investigating these issues have turned their attention to, *inter alia*, 20th-century works of art. Since the inception of the avant-garde movement, and especially the introduction of surrealism as an aesthetic, artists have started to imbue objects with individual identity. In surrealist painting and poetry, objects become subjects and act as autonomous agents. Their role is to derealise reality and to present it entirely different, imagined, in an experiment-like version. This is what Kornhauser referred to in his surrealist poetry as "total revolution of the objects" (Kornhauser, 2015, p. 10).

Writers and artists who developed the theory and philosophy behind surrealism have also introduced another central idea – that of "found objects," i.e. a semantic collection, comprised of artist's dreams, fetishes, aspirations, and hidden desires (Kornhauser, 2015). All of these feelings and impressions take the form of objects, which were found by the artist in either a metaphorical sense (as an association or symbol used in poetry) or a literal one (as objects that lose their real function to gain an imagined one). A found object is given a new, often unreal, meaning that is known only to the artists themselves.

Švankmajer often creates his works from objects that would otherwise be categorized as scrap. They are assigned with meaning only because he gives them meaning. As noted by Purš:

> An example of Švankmajer's creative process was recorded in one of the documentaries. The filming crew captured the moment when Švankmajer found a plant root that he later used to create the protagonist of his horror-fable *Little Otik (Otesánek).* Until the root was picked by Švankmajer, it was a mundane piece of wood, not unlike the thousands of other pieces of wood that can be found in a forest. When Švankmajer took interest in it, it became a menacing puppet, with the appetite of an alchemical, universal solvent – one that would dissolve the entire world if left unchecked (Purš, 2012, p. 216, own translation).

Similarly to other wunderkammers created throughout the ages, Švankmajer's project epitomises the common aphorism that "one man's trash is another man's treasure." It shows that elevating a useful object or scrap to the status of a semiophore does not require society, critics or connoisseurs. On the other hand, it is impossible to overlook the fact that, in most cases, semiophore-men have the power to change the status of an object. While scrap-men can also possess objects, which might become semiophores in their eyes, the status of these objects will not change for society at large.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Švankmajer's *Kunstkammer* and his entire body of work within Czech surrealism illustrate how the objects used in his art function. They can be considered found objects (fetishes and associations) that often function as semiophores and have been imbued with identity and agency. Hence, every thing has the potential to mean everything.

Most of the objects in Švankmajer's *Kunstkammer* are created from scraps, which turn into semiophores when put together and which, similarly to those in Rudolf II's unique collection, were put on display only for the collector himself and a selected few. This demonstrates that Švankmajer has been creating his works only for the purpose of self-therapy and because he sees artistic creation as a natural and liberating human activity, in accordance with the main principles of surrealism. Švankmajer has frequently mentioned that he considers surrealism to be not only art but also a way of life. All of the 16th-century concepts that originate from the interpretative paradigm and have been discussed in this paper, i.e. micro- and macrocosm, alchemy, magic, and hermeticism, are reflected in Švankmajer's modern kunstkammer. In fact, Švankmajer argues that reality should not be interpreted solely through the lens of science because there are mysterious and unexplained things beyond our perception – the products of our imagination.

Furthermore, such objects are a perfect fit for the surrealist program, as they are transformed and moved away from the visible to the invisible. Thus, they change from being useful into being meaningful and become semiophores (Kornhauser, 2015). According to Kornhauser, surrealist objects meet the same criteria that Pomian set for collections: they satisfy the human need for viewing strange and wonderful objects and their unusual forms of representation. The eclectic and incohesive nature of these collections can be translated into the principles of surrealist poetry (Kornhauser, 2015), which also presents a strange and personal collection comprised of the poet's found objects, fetishes, memories, associations, and dreams.

It should be noted, however, that because Švankmajer is a surrealist, the value that he would assign to his collection would be purely subjective and emotional. The objects in Švankmajer's *Kunstkammer* do not have a practical function, but they are still useful to the collector himself, by enabling him a form of self-therapy, and to society, by becoming objects of study. The collection itself and the act of its creation—by choosing the artefacts that will comprise it or, as is the case with Švankmajer, by creating the objects and seeking creative fulfilment—correspond to the act of collecting for pleasure (Markowski, 1997). Surrealists often stimulate their artistic creativity with the use of concepts developed within the framework of psychoanalysis, such as fetish, pleasure, association or the subconscious. This individualized way of thinking about art in the context of the artist has also been adopted by Švankmajer.

The concept of micro- and macrocosm is thus directly reflected in Švankmajer's work. While his *Kunstkammer* is a micro project with regards to the scale of

his artistic work, his entire body of work can be construed as a macrocosm. It is also worth mentioning that there is a trend to view Švankmajer life's work as a kunstkammer (Purš, 2012), which creates interesting new opportunities for discussing art as a collection in the context of *curieuses,* i.e. the discussed earlier curiosity about the world.

Interestingly, *Kunstkammer* has inspired Bruno Solařík to write his new book, which was published in 2018 on the wave of popularity of *Insects* (2018), Švankmajer's latest film. Solařík's book is arranged in a manner similar to that of a kunstkammer and was written as a response to the challenge issued by Švankmajer. In one of his interviews, Švankmajer stated that simply cutting the opening and closing credits from his films would be enough to make them into a complete story (Švankmajer, 2018).

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