



"Musei Wormiani Historia," the frontispiece from the Museum Wormianum depicting Ole Worm's cabinet of wonders in Denmark in 1655.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESKTOP

On the UCLA campus, where we sit, there is a great divide between North and South Campus. It's not unique. Nearly every university in the world, as far as we can tell, has a similar border. It's not always as geographically specific. Rarely is it a straight line. And, truth be told, you'd be hard pressed to trace it on the ground, even here at UCLA. It exists largely in the imagination. But you know when you've crossed over.

It's the old divide between the two cultures identified by C. P. Snow more than half a century ago, with science on one side and the humanities on the other. Never mind that this simple notion has been critiqued and complicated extensively since then. Three cultures, anyone? Four? More?

In an influential 1992 essay entitled "About Misunderstanding About Misunderstandings," the physicist and essayist Jean-Marc Lévy-Leblond wrote: "Science is not a large island separated from the mainland of culture, but a vast and scattered archipelago of islets, often farther apart from one another than from the continent. An expert in one field is a non-expert in almost all others."

Of course, boundary crossers have flourished over the past half century and more, as they did for centuries previous. Nevertheless, these imaginary borders and islands still have enormous power.

Here at *Boom*, we count ourselves among the border and ocean crossers. Our mission is to convene conversations that leap disciplinary boundaries and break down the imaginary walls that distance what happens within our great universities from the

world beyond. We find ourselves sympathetic to the kind of mission espoused by the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County: “to inspire wonder, discovery, and responsibility for our natural and cultural worlds.”

Though the L.A. museum is just over a century old, natural history museums have roots that stretch back more than five hundred years to the *Wunderkammern*—the “cabinets of wonder”—of early modern Europe. In these constructions, natural and cultural artifacts were arranged, juxtaposed, and sometimes jumbled together in an effort to make sense of the world, old and new. The *Wunderkammer* was a device for staging wonder in the face of the amazing diversity and weirdness of the world, but also a device for discovery: of the new, the unknown, patterns, and laws. Science grew up in cabinets of wonder, and, so, arguably, did human understanding of our place in the world, and our sense of responsibility for knowledge, understanding, and care.

Scientific inquiry was never separated from humanistic inquiry. They went hand in hand in the *Wunderkammern*. We think they still go hand in hand.

And so—with guest editor and science writer extraordinaire Hillary Rosner—we’ve assembled a cabinet of wonders in this issue. “Here at the end of the continent,” Hillary says, “experiments lurk everywhere you look. They’re in our power plants, our forests and mountains, our agricultural fields, our jobs, our zip codes, our street-lights—even in our minds.” With this issue, Hillary helps us celebrate California as a great cabinet of wonders.

Each of the pieces in this issue is also what might be called a boundary object in the two cultures, meaning that each sits somewhere astride that borderland. Some are more strange and weird than others. Each can help us think about that boundary, and whether that border is useful or perhaps best blurred or even erased.

Step back from each individual piece and you might see that this borderland is really the object of study in this issue: the relationship between science and storytelling or science and humanities, the stories we tell about ourselves and the world, and the stories we tell about the stories we tell ourselves.

We’re curious to hear what you see here. Let us know your thoughts.

Yours truly,
Jon Christensen