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**A Remote Tableau Composition from the Corona “Home Wunderkammer”**

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# **VANITAS RELOADED: A REMOTE TABLEAU COMPOSITION FROM THE CORONA "HOME WUNDERKAMMER"**

**Abstract:** Visuals - images - are a globally understandable exchange and copyable transmission of information. "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space," Hamlet noticed. We also use our Coronavirus home office for experimental journeys in the Renaissance and Baroque periods. As in the 15th / 16th / 17th Century, worlds far away from us were discovered, and we embark on digital adventures that are temporary, simultaneous, synchronous, asynchronous, independent of location. We decided to work with digital photography as a visual method for mainly two reasons. First, taking photos can be done relatively easy during a shut down in the home office. We can train creativity and visual perception without being in a university's studio. Second, photographs can be analyzed and compared with paintings and therefore criticized by their motifs, aesthetic representation, and within their time frame. Our visual souvenirs are photographs and videos in the mirror of illusion, immersion, and imagination.

**Keywords:** visual arts, relocated design process, baroque as contemporary, Corona shut down, digital communication, home office

## **I. Introduction = The Pandemic Crisis**

On 11 March, 2020, Berlin was completely shut down in an attempt to stop the Coronavirus pandemic. All scientific institutes were closed – the universities, libraries, museums, workshops, and studios. Conferences, field trips, presentations, and exhibitions were canceled; restaurants, bars, and shops were closed. Social, cultural, and scientific life was reduced to the so-called home office.

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Centuries before the current Corona pandemic, plague, smallpox, typhus, dysentery, and cholera marked the vulnerability of humans, their temporality, and transience. In the arts, Vanitas and Natura Morte still life paintings, as well as Memento Mori artworks, symbolize precisely this knowledge in a purely visual language.

During similar crisis times, Giovanni Bocaccio wrote the *Decamerone* about a plague-related time-out in Florence. Sir Issac Newton developed the *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687) when Trinity College in Cambridge was closed due to the plague, and he was in quarantine at his home office in Woolsthorpe for two years. In the 18th Century, when several epidemics were raging, Sir Wilhelm Herschel constructed his reflecting telescopes and discovered previously invisible planets, moons, nebulae, and double stars. He pushed our visual limits far to the sky.

Johann Sebastian Bach, Georg Philipp Telemann, and Georg Friedrich Händel defied deadly diseases, wars, and constant political conflicts with their compositions.

Our involuntarily Corona home office is, on the one hand, a drastic, dramatic reduction, but on the other hand, is an enormous opportunity for concentration, reduction, imagination, and the change to work with contemporary media and digital communication. The interior and its beautiful *Instagram* image become the sum and mirror of the whole world, on a computer screen – but expanded with unified communications and collaboration, in a simultaneous, synchronous, asynchronous, location-independent way. We concentrate on images because visuals are a globally understandable exchange and copyable transmission of information.

## II. Wunderkammer / Cabinets of Curiosities

In the Renaissance and Baroque periods, *Wunderkammer*, wonder chambers and cabinets of curiosities stood for discovery, research, curiosity for the world, and a longing for knowledge. The Wunderkammer's spectrum of representations and knowledge consists of five categories: Naturalia, Scientifica, Artificialia, Exotica, and Mirabilia. Art and natural sciences blended to form the backbone for new cultural techniques and information components, for architecture and mathematical relations.

Our reload for a remote – not presence-based – tableau composition, not painted but photographed with digital cameras, optimized not with pigments and brushes but with digital *light spaces*, contains exactly these five categories.

Many of the Wunderkammers form the basis for today's museums, e.g., the Green Vault in Dresden. A famous example is the collection of Sir Hans Sloane because his 71,000 objects are the founding collection of the British Museum in London. Until 2020, the collector Thomas Olbricht presented his Wunderkammer curated by Kunstkammer Georg Laue, Munich, in the Me Collectors Room Berlin, where students could visit virtually in a video. Olbricht impressively set contemporary art, e.g., photographs by Cindy Sherman and Juergen Teller, in a dialogue with

the historic and rare objects. The Feuerle Collection in Berlin is pursuing a similar concept. In a hall-like and extremely dark bunker from WWII, architecturally slightly transformed by John Pawson, the collector Désiré Feuerle shows East Asian art from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries together with works by contemporary artists such as Nobuyoshi Araki and Anish Kapoor. For this reason, these collections – which can only be viewed online during the pandemic crisis – serve us to link times and locations for our digital adventures.

As in the 15<sup>th</sup> / 16<sup>th</sup> / 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries, worlds far away from us have been discovered, we also embark on digital time travels and mind games. Our visual souvenirs are photographs and videos in the mirror of illusion, immersion, and imagination – as Hamlet noticed: “O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space.” (Shakespeare 1601/02). Our group consists of 88 architecture students, two lecturers, Tino Brüllke and Susanne Junker, and a media specialist as a guest lecturer, film director Tim van Beveren.

### **III. The Tableau-Composition = Vanitas reloaded**

Vanitas still lifes, or *Natura Morte*, is a genre that spread across Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. They amaze with an almost photo-realistic and naturalistic representation of objects, which, however, are full of symbolic meanings. Collections and paintings in these cabinets and chambers were based on social representation, even demarcation and competition, and dependent on financial commitment, personal interests, and the individual hunting instinct. Specialized agents traveled the world to find and acquire unique objects.

We visited online databases, e.g. the Rijksstudio of the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, great masters of painting such as Nicolas van Verendael, Balthasar van der Ast, Antonio Ponce, Adriaen van Utrecht, Juan Sanchez Cotan, Abraham Mignon, Pieter Boel, Willem van Aest, Jan Lievens, Johannes Hannot, Jan Davidszoon de Heem and Willem Kalf. In this environment and the still life category, several female painters also successfully created paintings that resemble today's photo-realistic computer renderings – around 400 years ago. These painters include Clara Peeters, Rachel Ruysch, and Maria Sibylla Merian, with Artemisia Gentileschi being the best known today with well-respected exhibitions. Regardless of the societal status and gender distinction defined in history, artists primarily acted as independent producers. They were highly valued during baroque times.

For our production of photographs, we set aside traditional memento-mori motifs such as skulls and burning candles in order to deal less with transience and death. Instead, we have dealt intensively with curiosity and depiction of the world, with a single individual and simultaneously serial aspects within a strict object specification. Our task was to take a photograph of heterogeneous composition. The objects we ask to photograph as still life are potatoes, a single shoe, a book, a timepiece, and some curry spices. Objects that at first glance have nothing to do with each

other, even appearing ridiculous and absurd in combination, should be arranged so that chaos and arbitrariness can be overcome and dissolved in favor of proportion, harmony, and dynamism, maybe even beauty.

The given objects of the five criteria are to be arranged on a table which, like the entire background, is to be covered with black cloth. Space and background disappear in the dark, so the colors of the objects, their volumes and surfaces are mounted and staged in a notably three-dimensional manner. For the metamorphosis of space, time, and appearance, we looked for mental inspiration, among others at Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. We were particularly motivated by her portrayal of night skating on the River Thames:

*It was an evening of astonishing beauty. (...)  
All the time they seemed to be skating in fathomless depths  
of air, so blue the ice had become (...).  
Above and around this brilliant circle like a bowl of darkness  
pressed the deep black of a winter's night.  
And then into this darkness there began to rise with pauses,  
which kept the expectation alert and the mouth open,  
flowering rockets; crescents; serpents; a crown.  
At one moment the woods and distant hills showed  
green as on a summer's day;  
the next all was winter and blackness again.*

Virginia Woolf *Orlando*, 1928, quoted from The Gutenberg Project/  
online/CC

Due to the Coronavirus, it was impossible to go on a shopping tour to search for and buy the required objects, because of closed shopping malls and deserted shopping streets. Instead, it was a matter of exploring and utilizing the potential of our own homes. Exchange transactions were just as impossible in times of hermetic social distancing. We set a time window of three weeks to grow the potatoes and another week to build up the composition and take the first photograph. After this step, we conducted a video meeting review and criticized the photographs. Then another week for revision followed where the students exchanged wrong objects, changed light sources or perspectives. They also improved the composition through compression or staggering. We allowed small improvements such as cropping and light graduation with Photoshop and Lightroom. Finally, each student had to submit a single photograph online. The cameras the students used range from smartphones to various digital high-end cameras and lenses from Sony, Canon, Nikon, and even Leica.

For the music of the video (<https://vimeo.com/426765866>) we chose a digital harpsichord version of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Aria*, Goldberg Variations, blended with computer sounds. The entire Wunderkammer becomes reloaded in further work steps.

#### IV. Naturalia = Potatoes

With the botanical name *Solanum Tuberosum*, potatoes represent the category of Naturalia, growing with shoots and roots and decaying to become inedible at the same time.

They are undoubtedly a basic food, so completely normal and understated in our everyday life today. The yellowish, brown, or reddish tuber can be cooked, baked, fried, or pureed in countless dishes. Potato dishes are available in countless regional variations in Europe. However, the potato did not originate as a tuber but as an exotic plant with leaves and flowers. It only came to Europe in the Baroque era. The legend says that the English adventurer Sir Walter Raleigh found it while searching for the gold of El Dorado and brought it to the court of Elizabeth I with tobacco leaves.

This plant is native to Peru, Chile, and Argentina. There is evidence that it reached the Canary Islands on sailing ships in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and from there to Spain. These sailing ships brought artifacts and luxury goods to Europe, such as Nautilus shells, Chinese porcelain, mother-of-pearl, and ivory, which were then portrayed as representative objects in still life paintings.

The students partially peeled our potatoes and sliced them like baroque lemons and oranges. Their peels even curl like ringlets. Sprouts and germs are reminiscent of species, such as small hedgehogs. Hairy potatoes look like crossbreeds of mice and beetles, some potatoes are similar to the strange beasts, to reptiles and insects as shown in the Vanitas paintings. There are even potatoes that resemble unicorns with their drives or irritate with looks like physiognomies of bizarre characters. The collection of so-called character heads is, in turn, another spectrum in the Wunderkammer.

#### V. Artificialia = A Single Shoe

Artificialia denote human-made objects, but not arbitrary, instead particularly artistic, refined ones of notably admirable beauty.

As an equivalent to this category, we chose a single shoe, not a pair, because the real physical movement is difficult with just one shoe. This specific limitation is another reference to our digital mind game.

Shoes are by no means just practical aids to protect human feet from cold, wet, or sharp-edged ground, but also cultural narratives, be it to express social status, gender, coolness, or somewhat hidden codes to peer groups. A famous example is the *talons rouge* of the French monarch Louis XIV in the painting by Hyacinthe Rigaud. These royal shoes with the orange-red heels and bows and buckles look downright feminine today, just like the raised red soles designed by Christian Louboutin are undoubtedly intended for women.

The spectrum and, to put it more precisely, the fund in the home office includes slippers à la Jean-Honoré Fragonard, ankle boots with a rococo-style tapestry print, sky-heel straps with rhinestones and glitter, to rubber boots and worn-out sneakers without laces. A single ice skate spans the arc of meaning to the icy winter pictures by painters such as Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Hendrick Avercamp.

Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburgh's boot, the front figure in Rembrandt van Rijn's *Nightwatch*, can be found as a fluffy Ugg boot. Bridal shoes and baby shoes refer to the family in the home office. They are personal mementos and emotional family treasures that symbolize the essential dates in life.

## VI. Mirabilia = A Book

This category's object is a book. It represents the legacy of countless stories from all over the world. Books are the conservation of knowledge in manuscripts and portfolios for communication and the transport of information. We value books as excellent instruments to record and pass on tales, narratives, sagas, insights, and thoughts from past centuries.

Books also stand as physical counterparts to the digital cloud, as tangible objects, even perceptible with their unique paper smell.

Some of the books shown in the photographs read as direct references to the Baroque period, e.g., with sonnets by Francesco Petrarca and William Shakespeare. Other students chose speaking titles like Giacomo Casanova's *The Story of My Life* and Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

Other photographs show empty notebooks as metaphors. Some sketchbooks refer to recent field trips to Thailand and China. On the one hand, these choices express the longing to travel again to distant countries, but on the other hand, they recall the origins of so many artifacts that are portrayed in the Baroque still life paintings.

Some books are closed like the shutdown. There are also books photographed like fans at the moment of leafing through, and others are just dissolving into individual sheets and thus evoke associations with manuscripts.

## VII. Scientifica = A Timepiece

Timepieces are elaborated and complicated technical and scientific devices. They measure time, show the course of time, cycles, eternity, and rhythm, structure, and order – as well as shutter speed, video meeting schedules, upload, and download traffic. Historically, they closely link to mechanics, mathematics, astronomy, and geography.

Although nobody has a sundial in their home offices, not even an hourglass à la Hendrick Hondius, all students play with the size and type of clocks. Some students

take photos of small filigree jewelry wristwatches, and others frame their compositions with plate-sized kitchen clocks and old-fashioned alarm clocks with bell ears. Gold and stucco-decorated grandfather clocks protruding as background are also striking.

The noble baroque Habsburg observatories of Empress Maria Theresia, which were constructed to discover outer space and dimensions of time, and painted by Canaletto in 1758/61, are interpreted as a Rolex wristwatch and a heavy gold link bracelet. As a visual reference, the different metal tones of these timepieces reflect baroque instruments such as astrolabes, sextants, and chronometers.

### **VIII. Exotica = Curry spices**

Exotic spice powder such as curry, cinnamon, nutmeg symbolizes our Eurocentric view of the geographically distant, export and import, arbitrage, supply and value chains.

Curry powder is traded as a spice mixture in London from around 1784, with ingredients such as yellow turmeric, dark cumin, ground cardamom and cloves, nutmeg, ginger, cayenne pepper, chili. Therefore, this olfactory simulation extends from the Middle East to China.

In contrast to the other objects, this powder has no precise dimensions, no size nor scale. Instead, it has an ephemeral, almost transparent color shadow, like stardust in a warm, clayey atmosphere.

Golden, earthy, yellow, and orange hues are essential in the Renaissance and Baroque color concepts. These shades are similar to oranges, the legendary golden apples that, according to Greek mythology, were guarded across an ocean by the Hesperides and their dragon, giving the gods eternal youth. The choice of colors in our photographs is meant to reference the imported citrus fruits and the orangery architecture in baroque nobility courts.

### **IX. Light, Darkness and Chiaroscuro**

When we look at Vanitas still lifes in our home offices and analyze them for our visual time travels, we feel like archaeologists or even anthropologists who are suddenly transported 400 to 500 years back in time. We move in a field of tension between seeing and perceiving, impression, experience, and memory, sense, and meaning. Further parameters are the ideas of reality, of authenticity, of perspective, of pathos and aesthetics. In order to value and read the identity and the context of the paintings, their motif history, we did lectures on iconographic descriptions as cultural-scientific analyses. The lectures also included aspects such as changing a still life painting, e.g., through other objects and details. Based on this, we discussed the iconological decryption and interpretation. It reminded us



of finding codes and hidden meanings by experimenting with digital photography and video techniques.

Creative thinking and imagination open the eyes. It resurrects scenes and even shifts or even expands reality.

With Athanasius Kircher's *Camera Obscura*, which he published in his treatise *Ars Magna Lucis Et Umbrae* in 1646, and René Descartes' eye in *La Dioptrique* 1637 as models, we studied dark rooms, chambers, chapels, and black boxes as well as the images generated therein. The effect of light only becomes evident through shadows, which can vary between soft or hard. This cognition applies to bright sunlight as well as to a flickering candle.

The paradox that an image becomes more visible through darkness led us to a further paradox in the discussion. The view is more likely to fall on an object if it is partially covered, by shadows or further objects. Dealing with this layering reminded us of the layering techniques used for digital drawings and photographs.

Darkness, twilight, and night are the backgrounds for dramatic and sublime productions, especially with the painters of the Baroque and Romantic periods. Objects depicted using chiaroscuro or low-key photography appear isolated from a dark image space. Using such methods, we reduce these objects to themselves. They appear occupied with their inner imagination in the absence of all other images.

## X. Conclusion

Today almost all information is available incredibly quickly on the internet. Search engines provide a selection of answers within a fraction of a second, from images and videos, jumping across the boundaries of space and time. Nevertheless, the most impressive experience remains the perception and the feeling of all five senses.

The objects we worked with to reload Vanitas came to life through the selection and the encounter with each other and dialogue with light. Visual hierarchies and graduations are created and appear, which vary depending on the particular meaning, interpretation, and imagination and yet show concordant chains of thought.

One student, Sophie Mbaye, noticed while taking the photos that a new narrative emerges in the search for the past and its reload:

*A door opens into an old attic room.*

*Dust falls miraculously from books.*

*A soirée as if frozen, a forgotten shoe, golden light, traces of former life...*

This creative combination, like an analog-digital mythical creature from a baroque cabinet of curiosities, was both a concept and a strategy for us, namely to be curious and be amazed as an ongoing process, and to perceive apparently inconspicuous objects and to understand their meaning in the sense of a universal context.

Our view of the world, perspective, scale, volume, weight, value, duration, time, precision, relationships, harmony, and contrasts are observed, analyzed, and interpreted. A new look at our world is created based on more than 500 years of artistic and scientific techniques and experiences.

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## VANITAS RELOADED: A REMOTE TABLEAU COMPOSITION FROM THE CORONA "HOME WUNDERKAMMER" (summary)

In the Renaissance and Baroque periods, *Wunderkammer*, wonder chambers and cabinets of curiosities, stood for discovery, research, curiosity for the world, and a longing for knowledge. Centuries before the current Coronavirus pandemic, plague, smallpox, and cholera marked the vulnerability of humans, temporality, and transience. Vanitas and Natura Morta still life paintings symbolize this knowledge in purely visual language, – visuals as a globally understandable exchange and copyable transmission of information.

The interior and its beautiful *Instagram* image become the sum and mirror of the whole world, on a computer screen, *O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space* (*Hamlet*, Shakespeare, 1601/02). As a result of the pandemic, we are all reduced to our home office chambers of wonder – temporarily – but expanded with unified communications and collaboration, in a simultaneous, synchronous, asynchronous, location-independent way. The Wunderkammer's spectrum of representations and knowledge consists of five categories: Naturalia, Scientifica, Artificialia, Exotica, and Mirabilia. Art and natural sciences blended to form the backbone for new cultural techniques and information components, for architecture and mathematical relations.

Our reload for a remote – not presence-based – tableau composition, not painted but photographed with digital cameras, optimized not with pigments and brushes but with digital *light spaces*, contains exactly these five categories. The respective home chamber was sighted for suitable wonderful objects. Nothing is bought during the Coronavirus Shut Down; everyone stays at home alone with heterogeneous to absurd finds.

Potatoes represent the Naturalia, growing with shoots and decaying inedible at the same time. Clocks measure as scientifically exact devices – Scientifica – our time, shutter speed, video meeting schedules, upload, and download traffic. A single shoe expresses human artistry to rise above mere physicality, revealing social and cultural narratives. Exotic spice powder such as curry, cinnamon, nutmeg symbolizes our Eurocentric view of the geographically distant, export and import, arbitrage, supply and value chains. The open book, Mirabilia, stands as a physical counterpart to the digital cloud, a tangible legacy of countless stories from past centuries, and the conservation of knowledge in manuscripts and portfolios for communication and the transport of knowledge.

Our view of the world, perspective, scale, volume, weight, value, duration, time, precision, relationships, harmony, and contrasts are observed, analyzed, and interpreted. A new look at our world is created based on more than 500 years of artistic and scientific techniques and experiences.

The photographs *Vanitas reloaded* were developed by architecture students in April and May 2020 during the Coronavirus Shut Down. For the music of the video (<https://vimeo.com/426765866>) we chose a digital harpsichord version of Johann Sebastian Bach's "Aria," Goldberg Variations, blended with computer sounds. The entire Wunderkammer becomes reloaded in further work steps.

**Appendix. *Vanitas Reloaded*. Prof. Dr. Susane Junker, as of August 2020.**



© Alicia Wehlitz, *Vanitas reloaded*.



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