

INHALING THE SPORE

Field trip to a museum of natural (un)history

By Lawrence Weschler

Deep in the Cameroonian rain forests of West Africa there lives a floor-dwelling ant known as *Megaloponera foetens*, or, more commonly, the stink ant. This large ant—indeed, it's one of the very few capable of emitting a cry audible to the human ear—survives by foraging for food among the fallen leaves and undergrowth of the extraordinarily rich rain-forest floor.

On occasion, while thus foraging, one of these ants will become infected by inhaling the microscopic spore of a fungus from the genus *To mentella*, one of millions of such spores raining down upon the forest floor from somewhere in the canopy above. Upon being inhaled, the spore lodges itself inside the ant's tiny brain and immediately begins to grow, quickly fomenting bizarre behavioral changes in its host. The creature appears troubled and confused, and now, for the first time in its life, it leaves the forest floor and begins an arduous climb up the stalk of a vine or fern.

Driven on by the still-growing fungus, the ant finally achieves a seemingly prescribed height, whereupon, utterly spent, it attaches its mandibles to the plant it has been climbing and, thus affixed, waits to die. Ants that have met their doom in this fashion are quite a common sight in certain sections of the rain forest.

The fungus, for its part, lives on: it continues

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to consume the ant's brain, moving through the rest of the nervous system and presently through all the soft tissue that remains of the ant. After approximately two weeks, a spikelike protrusion erupts from what was once the ant's head. Growing to a length of about an inch and a half, the spike features a bright-orange tip heavily laden with spores, which now begin to rain down onto the forest floor for other unsuspecting ants to inhale.

The great mid-century American neurophysiologist Geoffrey Sonnabend inhaled his spore, as it were, one insomniac night in 1936 while convalescing from a combined physical and nervous breakdown at a small resort near the majestic Iguassu Falls, in the so-called Mesopotamian region at the Argentinean-Brazilian-Paraguayan frontier. Earlier that evening, he had attended a recital of German Romantic lieder given by the great Romanian-American vocalist Madelena Delani. Delani, one of the leading soloists on the international concert circuit of her day, was known to suffer from a rare form of Korsakov's syndrome, with its attendant obliteration of virtually all short- and intermediate-term memory, with the exception, in her case, of the memory of music itself.

Although Sonnabend left the concert hall that evening without ever meeting Delani, the concert had electrified him, and through a sleepless night he conceived, as if in a single blast of inspiration, a radical new theory of memory, a theory he'd spend the next decade painstaking-

ly elaborating in his three-volume *Obliscence: Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter*, published by Northwestern University Press in 1946. Memory, for Sonnabend, was an illusion. Forgetting, not remembering, was the inevitable outcome of all experience. From this perspective, as he explained in the introduction to his turgid masterwork, "we, amnesiacs all, condemned to live in an eternally fleeting present, have created the most elaborate of human constructions, memory, to buffer ourselves against the intolerable knowledge of the irreversible passage of time and irretrievability of its moments and events." (page 16) He continued to expand on this doctrine through the explication of an increasingly intricate model in which a so-called Cone of Obliscence is bisected by Planes of Experience, which continually slice the cone at changing though precise angles. The theory was

ETHNOGRAPHER BERNARD MASTON REPORTED ACCOUNTS OF THE
DEPRONG MORI, "A SMALL DEMON WHICH THE LOCAL SAVAGES
BELIEVE ABLE TO PENETRATE SOLID OBJECTS"

perhaps at its most suggestive when it broached such uncanny shadow phenomena as the experiences of premonition, déjà vu, and foreboding. But once the plane of any particular experience had passed through the cone, the experience was irretrievably forgotten, and all else was illusion—a particularly haunting conclusion, in that no sooner had Sonnabend published his magnum opus than both he and it fell largely into oblivion.

As for Delani, ironically, and utterly unbeknownst to Sonnabend, she had perished in a freak automobile accident within a few days of her concert at Iguassu Falls.

For his part, Donald R. Griffith, Rockefeller University's eminent chiroptologist (and author of *Listening in the Dark: Echolocation in Bats and Men*), appears to have inhaled something suspiciously sporelike back in 1952, while reading the field reports of an obscure late-nineteenth-century American ethnographer named Bernard Maston. While doing fieldwork in 1872 among the Dozo of the Tripsicum Plateau of the circum-Caribbean region of northern South America, Maston reported having heard several accounts of the *deprong mori*, or piercing devil, which he described as "a small demon which the local savages believe able to penetrate solid objects," such as the walls of their thatch huts and, in one instance, even a child's outstretched arm.

Almost eighty years later, while reviewing some of Maston's notes in the archive, Griffith,

for some reason, as he later recounted, "smelled a bat." He and a band of assistants undertook an arduous eight-month expedition to the Tripsicum Plateau, where Griffith grew increasingly convinced that he was dealing not with just any bat but with a very special bat indeed, and specifically the tiny *Myotis lucifugus*, which though previously documented had never before been studied in detail. It became Griffith's hypothesis that whereas most bats deploy frequencies in the ultrasonic range to assist them in the echolocation that enables them to fly in the dark, *Myotis lucifugus* had evolved a highly specialized form of echolocation based on ultraviolet wavelengths, which even, in some instances, verged into the neighboring X-ray band of the wave spectrum. Furthermore, these particular bats had evolved highly elaborate nose leaves, or horns, which allowed them to focus their echowave transmissions in a narrow beam. All of which would account for the wide range of bizarre effects described by Maston's informants.

Griffith and his team only lacked for proof. Time after time, the little devils, on the very verge of capture, would fly seamlessly through their nets. So Griffith devised a brilliant snaring device consisting of five solid-lead walls, each one eight inches thick, twenty feet high, and two hundred feet long—all of them arrayed in a radial pattern, like spokes of a giant wheel, along the forest floor. The team affixed seismic sensors all along the walls in an intricate gridlike pattern, and proceeded to wait.

For two months, the monitors recorded not a thing—surely the bats were simply avoiding the massive, and massively incongruous, lead walls—and Griffith began to despair of ever confirming his hypothesis. Finally, however, early on the morning of August 18, at 4:13 A.M., the sensors recorded a pock. The number-three wall had received an impact of magnitude 10^3 ergs twelve feet above the forest floor, 193 feet out from the center of the wheel. The team members carted an X-ray-viewing device out to the indicated spot, and sure enough, at a depth of $7\frac{1}{8}$ inches, they located the first *Myotis lucifugus* ever contained by man, "eternally frozen in a mass of solid lead."

Megaloponera foetens, *Myotis lucifugus*, Geoffrey Sonnabend and Madelena Delani, the Dozo and the *deprong mori*, Bernard Maston and Donald R. Griffith—these and countless other spores rain down upon a small, nondescript storefront operation located along the main commercial drag of downtown Culver City in the middle of West Los Angeles's end-

less pseudo-urban sprawl: the Museum of Jurassic Technology (according to a fading blue banner hanging outside), an institution that presents precisely the sort of anonymous-looking facade one might easily pass right by. Which most days would be just as well, since most days it's closed.

But if you happened to hear of it, as I began hearing of it a couple years ago on my occasional visits to L.A. (it's been at that site for about six years now), and thus actively sought it out; or else, if you just happened to be dallying at the bus stop right outside its portals on one of those occasions when it actually was open—well then, your curiosity piqued, you might just find yourself going up and tentatively pressing its door buzzer. While waiting for an answer, you might study the curious little diorama slotted into the wall off to the side of the entry (a diminutive white urn surrounded by floating pearlescent moths) or another equally perplexing diorama off to the other side of the entry (three chemistry-set bottles arrayed in a curiously loving display: oxide of titanium, oxide of iron, and alumina, according to their labels).

At length the door is likely to open, and usually it will be David Hildebrand Wilson himself, the museum's founder and director, a small and unassuming man, perhaps in his mid-forties, who will be smiling there solicitously (as if it were specifically you he'd been expecting all along) and happily bidding you to enter.

It's dark in there. As your eyes adjust, you take in an old wooden desk, on top of which a small sign proposes an admissions donation of \$3, though Wilson quickly assures you that this is a neighborhood museum and hence free to anybody from the neighborhood, and that, furthermore, he considers the bus-stop bench to be an integral part of the neighborhood. He leaves it to you to decide what that means, and for that matter, he leaves it all to you. He returns to his seat behind the desk and to his reading (two dusty antiquated books, the last time I was there: one entitled *Mental Hospitals*; the other, *The Elements of Folk Psychology*). The foyer, as it were, features a shabby, kind of halfhearted attempt at a gift shop, but probably you won't tarry long because your curiosity is already being drawn toward the museum proper.

And it's here that you'll encounter, across a maze of discrete alcoves, in meticulous displays exactly laid out, the ant, the bat, the falls, the diva, the insomniac . . . A preserved sample of the stink ant, for example, has its mandibles embedded into the stalk of a plastic fern behind glass in a standard natural-history-museum-style diorama. Sure enough, a thin spike is erupting out of its head. There's a phone receiver beside the vitrine, and when you pick it up you'll hear the entire history of *Megalopon-*



era foetens, largely as I conveyed it above.

A whole wing of the museum has been given over to the so-called Sonnabend/Delani Halls, where, among other things, you'll find an astonishingly well-realized aquarium-size diorama of Iguassu Falls, where Sonnabend heard Delani perform, complete with gushing, recirculating water. It turns out, or so the nearby phone receiver will inform you, that the falls were doubly significant in Sonnabend's life, for they were also the place where his parents had first met. His father, Wilhelm, a young German structural engineer, had been attempting to span the falls with a daring suspension bridge, but the project had come to naught, his dream collapsing irre-

DRESS AND CAPE WORN
BY MADELENA DELANI

vocably into the abyss a mere day short of completion. From either side of the diorama at the museum, you can see where Wilhelm's bridge would have gone: from head on, you can peer through an eyepiece and, miraculously, see the bridge itself, hovering serenely over the cataract. The effect is so vividly realized that you'll look again from the sides—your eyes, or something, must be playing tricks on you—but, no, nothing is there except falling water.

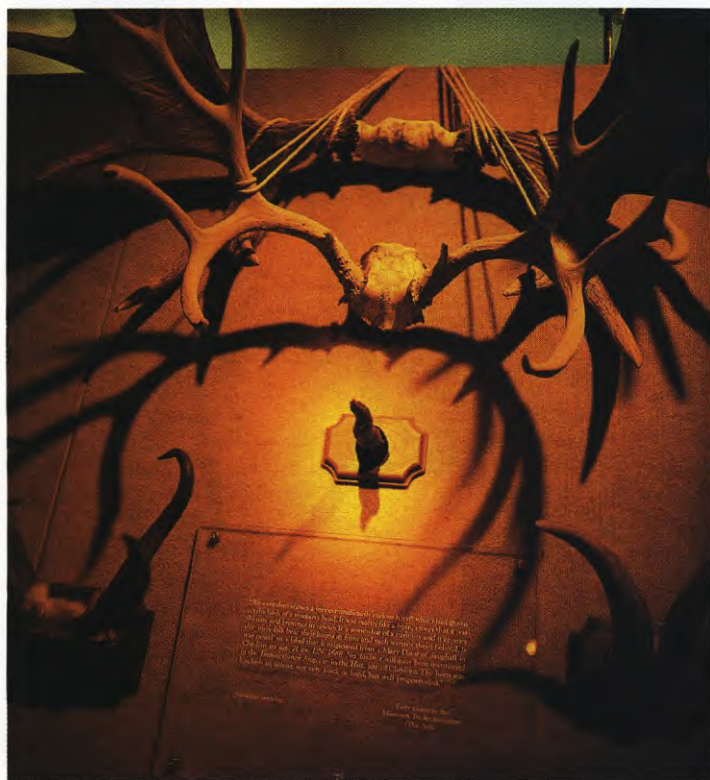
Sonnabend's actual desk and study have been salvaged and painstakingly re-created. There's a wall of photos detailing the stages of his life and his parents' lives, and a whole documentary embalism, as it were, devoted to the career of one Charles F. Gunther, an eccentric Chicago mil-

ceiver, and have Sonnabend's whole theory laid out for you through a series of haunting dioramas of variously intersecting (and compoundingly complexifying) cones and planes, complete with a representation of such technical subtleties as the perverse and obverse experience boundaries, the Spelean Ring Disparity, "the Hollows," and, perhaps most provocatively, the Cone of Confabulation. (The voice in the receiver, the same voice as in all the other receivers, you may suddenly realize, is the same bland, slightly unctuous voice you've heard in every museum slide show or acoustiguide tour or PBS nature special you've ever endured: the reassuringly measured voice of unassailable institutional authority.)

Over to the side there's a whole room devoted exclusively to Madelena Delani, and around the corner you come upon another bench and another phone receiver and another elaborate display, this one detailing the bizarrely intersecting careers of Maston and Griffith. Once again, narrow-beam spotlights rise up and fade away, guiding you through the narrative—including a detailed exposition of how echolocation works in bats, complete with charts and graphs—culminating with a re-creation of a solid tranche from the lead wall, which presently becomes illuminated, as if from inside, in such a way that you can actually see the bat embedded there in mid-flight.

Through much of these explorations, you may well be the only person inside the museum, aside from Wilson, and he's a bit of a piercing devil himself. He pads about silently as you lose yourself in the various exhibits. One moment he's at his desk, the next he's gone, though who knows where—perhaps to a workroom secreted at the back of the store; a few moments later, however, he's back reading at his desk, as if he'd never been gone at all. You continue to poke about—there are a good dozen other exhibits up at any given time—and presently, eerily, you become aware of strains of Bach being played on . . . on . . . could it be an accordion? The desk chair is empty, the front door has been left slightly ajar: Wilson is on the sidewalk, blithely serenading the passing traffic.

You leave him to it. You continue to explore. Depending on what happens to be up at the time you're visiting, you may, for example, come upon the luminous white skeleton of some kind of rodent elegantly mounted on plush velvet beneath a glass bell. ("EUROPEAN MOLE—*Talpa europea*," explains the wall caption. "Occurs in all European countries south of 59 north latitude except Ireland. . . .") Beneath another glass case you can study "The Mary Rose Collection of Now-Extinct Nineteenth-Century French Moths." ("There's a slight misnomer there," Wilson informed me solicitously the first time I peered



BELOW MOOSE AND DEER ANTLERS, THE "HORN OF MARY DAVIS OF SAUGHALL"

lionaire confectioner, who was somehow responsible for bringing Wilhelm to Chicago after his Iguassu debacle and who, incidentally, was an inveterate collector in his own right. In fact, Gunther's awe-inspiring trove (with items ranging from the very desk upon which the Appomattox Surrender was signed to a swatch of dried skin sloughed off by the Serpent that first seduced Woman in Eden) came to constitute a cornerstone of the Chicago Historical Society, under whose auspices large portions of it can be seen to this day. Or, anyway, so the sequential phone receivers at the museum allege as they guide you through the tale.

You can sit on a bench, pick up another re-

into that case. He happened to be passing silently by. "Most of those particular moths are indeed French, but a few are actually Flemish—although with some it's hard to tell.")

Along a nearby wall (just off to the side, actually, from the vitrine containing the spike-sprouting ant) there's another standard museum-style array, of mounted horns and antlers—standard, that is, with the exception of one, the smallest of the lot: a solitary hairy protrusion. A nearby caption cites the testimony, inside quotation marks, of an "Early visitor to the *Musaeum Tradescantianum*, The Ark" to the effect that "we were shown an extraordinarily curious horn which had grown on the back of a woman's head. . . . The horn was blackish in color, not very thick or hard, but well proportioned." As, indeed, this specimen is.

Another display, entitled "Protective Auditory Mimicry," allows you to compare, by pushing the requisite buttons, the sounds made by certain small, iridescent beetles, "when threatened," with those made by certain similarly sized and hued pebbles, "while at rest." By this time, you, too, may be starting to feel a little bit threatened, a bit iridescent. You head back to the foyer where Wilson is back behind his desk, once again absorbed in his reading, the accordion resting along the wall by his side like a snoozing pet. You putter among the giftware, confused, hesitant.

"Um, excuse me," you may at length hazard. "Ahm, what exactly is this place?"

"Excuse me," I asked several months back toward the end of my first visit. "Ahm, what exactly is this place?" Wilson looked up from his reading: beatific deadpan.

I suppose I should say something here about Wilson's own presence, his own look, for it is of a piece with his museum. I have described him as diminutive, though a better word might be "simian." His features are soft and yet precise, a broad forehead, short black hair graying at the sides, a close-cropped version of an Amish beard, sans mustache, fringing his face and filling into his cheeks. He wears circular glasses, which somehow accentuate the elfin effect. He's been described as Ahab inhabiting the body of Puck (a pixie Ahab, a monomaniacal Puck), but the best description I ever heard came from his wife of twenty-five years, Diana (an anthropology graduate student and no particular giant herself; their friends sometimes refer to the two of them as "the little Wilsons"), who one day characterized his looks for me as those of "a pubescent Neanderthal."

"Well," Wilson replied coolly that first afternoon, unfazed, from behind his wooden desk (obviously he gets asked this sort of question all the time), "as you can see, we're a small natural-history museum with an emphasis on curiosities and technological innovation." He paused before going on: "We're definitely interested in presenting phenomena that other natural-history museums seem unwilling to present." Apparently he could sense that I remained a bit be-

"WE'RE A SMALL NATURAL-HISTORY MUSEUM," DAVID WILSON SAYS. "WE'RE INTERESTED IN PRESENTING PHENOMENA THAT OTHER NATURAL-HISTORY MUSEUMS SEEM UNWILLING TO PRESENT"

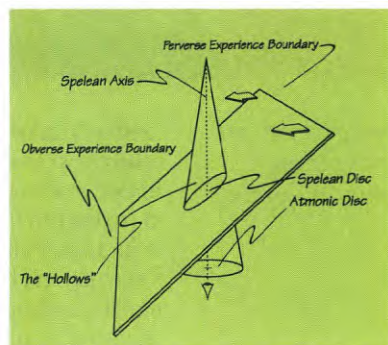
wildered. "The name lends a sense of what's inside but doesn't refer to a specific geologic time," he offered, helpfully. He then reached into his drawer and pulled out a pamphlet. "Here, this might be useful."

"THE MUSEUM OF JURASSIC TECHNOLOGY," the pamphlet's cover announced portentously, "—AND YOU." Inside, the pamphlet opened with a "GENERAL STATEMENT":

The Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, California, is an educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic. Like a coat of two colors, the museum serves dual functions. On the one hand, the museum provides the academic community with a specialized repository of relics and artifacts from the Lower Jurassic, with an emphasis on those that demonstrate unusual or curious technological qualities. On the other hand, the museum serves the general public by providing the visitor with a hands-on experience of "life in the Jurassic."

There immediately follows a small map, captioned "Jurassic," which in every other way looks exactly like a small map of what the rest of us might refer to as "Egypt." An arrow identifies what in any other rendition would get called the Nile River delta as "Lower Jurassic."

The text—which turns out to be the transcript of a visitor-activated slide show that ordinarily runs, accompanied by that same echt-institutional voice, in a small alcove to the side of the entry; it just happened to be out of order that afternoon—goes on to offer a treatise on museums in general. It traces the lineage of the current institution back to such progenitors as the Ptolemys' Library at Alexandria, founded in the third century B.C., through the Dark Ages (when the museological impulse sput-



GEOFFREY SONNABEND'S
"MODEL OF OBLISCENCE"

tered amid relic-preserving convents and monasteries), and then through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the impulse flowered once again through such elite-serving collections as those of John James Swammerdam, Dr. Matthew Maty, Olaus Worm with his "Museum Wormianum," and Elias Ashmole, until finally, in late-eighteenth-century America, the painter Charles Willson Peale virtually invented the museum as a public institution. The pamphlet goes on to trace the origins of the Museum of Jurassic Technology

tory museum—a flavor that has been described as "incongruity born of an overzealous spirit in the face of unfathomable phenomena."

Glory to Him, who endureth forever, and in whose hand are the keys of unlimited Pardon and unending Punishment.

All of which helped, and didn't.

"Um," I tried again, after having finished the pamphlet, "but I mean, how, specifically, did this place get started?"

"You mean *this* museum?" Wilson asked.

Well, yeah.

"Oh," he said. "Well, the seed material, I guess you could call it, for the current collection—the Flemish moths, for instance—came down to us through the collection of curiosities originally gathered together by the Thums—that's Owen Thum and his son, Owen Thum the Younger, who were botanists, or I guess really just gardeners, in southwestern Nebraska, in South Platte."

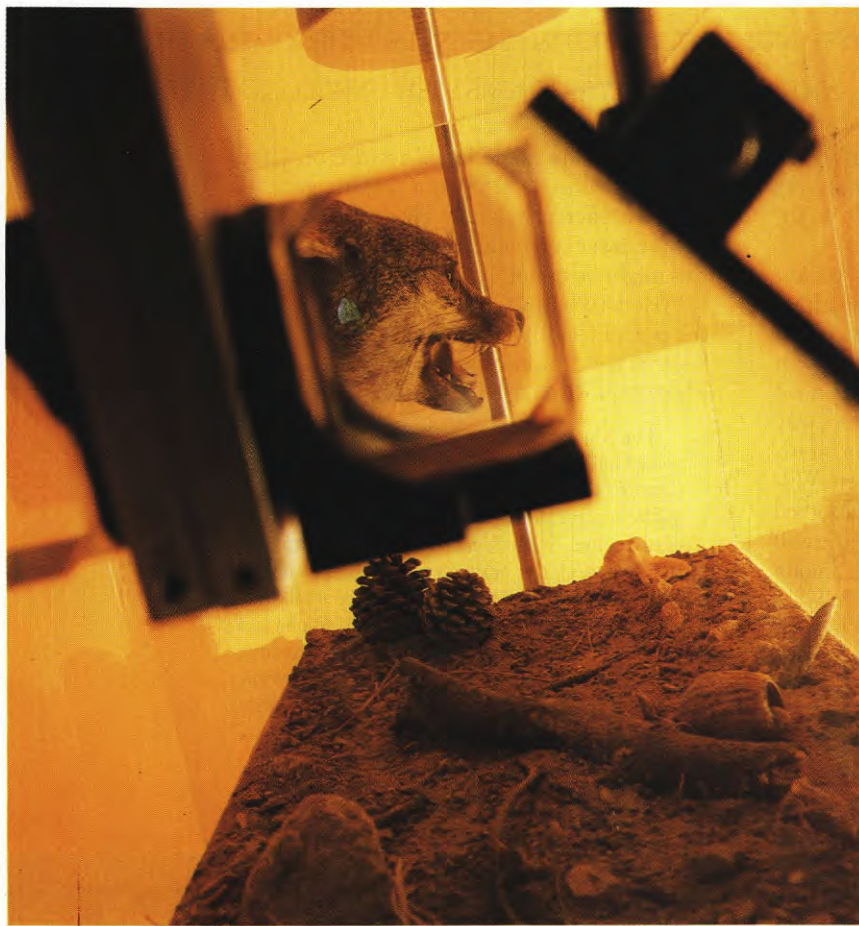
When was this?

"Oh, in the first half of this century—say, the Twenties for the father and on into the Fifties with Owen the Younger." Wilson then spun out an elaborately unlikely saga involving the Thums and Thum the Younger's widow, who lost the collection to an unsavory lawyer named Gerald Billius, who may even have murdered her to get it but who then gradually grew bored with his acquisition, eventually allowing it to lapse into the hands of his granddaughter, a curious Texas matron named Mary Rose Cannon, whom Wilson himself subsequently happened to meet one day in Pasadena. It was all, as I would subsequently come to recognize, a quintessentially Wilsonian

narrative: ornate, almost profuse, in some of its details but then suddenly fogging over, particularly as one gets closer to the present. Such stories usually both perform and require a kind of leap.

And how, for instance—I'd started choosing my words carefully—had Geoffrey Sonnabend and Madelena Delani, um, entered his life?

"Well, I first came upon Sonnabend when we were trying to expand an exhibit we used to have on memory. I myself tend to be pretty forgetful, so that memory's always been an interest of mine, and I was exploring the theories of Hermann Ebbinghaus, who was a great turn-of-the-century German memory researcher, in fact



AN EXHIBIT ENTITLED
"VOICE OF THE
AMERICAN GRAY FOX"

itself to "this period when many of the important collections of today were beginning to take shape." In fact, many of the exhibits in the MJT, according to the pamphlet, were originally part of smaller and less-well-known collections, such as the Devonian and Eocene. In the slide-show version, inspirational music of a certain generic oleaginous consistency now swells up as the narrative builds toward its climax:

Although the path has not always been smooth, over the years the Museum of Jurassic Technology has adapted and evolved until today it stands in a unique position among the institutions of the country. Still, even today, the museum preserves something of the flavor of its roots in the early days of the natural-his-

revitalized the whole field. I was at the University Research Library over at UCLA one day, leafing through their Ebbinghaus books, when I just happened to come upon Sonnabend's three-volume *Obliscence* the next call letter over. It seemed like nobody had looked into those books in ages—they hadn't been checked out in years—but I started reading. Sonnabend himself tells the story about the theory's genesis, about Madelena Delani and Iguassu Falls in the preface, and I was completely bowled over. In part, I suppose, it was the romance of this theory that seemed to foretell its own oblivion. And then, just a few days later, I happened to be listening to Jim Svejda's *Record Shelf* program on KUSC, and he was doing a whole hour show devoted exclusively to Madelena Delani—that, for instance, is how I first found out about how she died. It was an incredible coincidence—in fact, everything associated with the story is like a tissue of improbable coincidences—how they almost met, how they didn't, what either of them was doing there at the falls. And those kinds of coincidences are also a special interest of ours here at the museum. We contacted the Chicago Historical Society, and a fellow there named Rusty Lewis helped us enormously, particularly with the Gunther connection. The whole thing just grew and grew."

It was getting late—time to be gone and gone. As I was opening the door to leave, I once again noticed the diorama of the urn and the moths. What about that?

"Oh, that's a little urn surrounded by French moths—or, no, maybe Flemish, I'm not sure."

And what was the significance of the urn?

"It's just an urn. I don't think it means anything."

And that other diorama—the chemistry-set bottles?

"Oxide of titanium, oxide of iron, and alumina," Wilson recited solemnly. "Those are the three chemical constituents of corundum, which forms the basis for all sapphires and rubies. Actually, we have the bottles out there because of the link to sapphires, which, as you may know, have long been associated with qualities of faithfulness and endurance."

A few days later I happened to be at the UCLA library researching another project, and half on a lark, I started rifling through the computerized card catalogue. "Ebbinghaus, Hermann," I typed in, and sure enough there rose up a slew of references ("Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology," 1913, etc.). Then I typed in "Sonnabend, Geoffrey," and the screen churned for a while before finally

clocking in: "no record found." I subsequently called Northwestern University Press, Sonnabend's supposed publisher, but they'd never heard of him either. I called KUSC and asked for Jim Svejda; when he came on, I explained the situation, told him about the exhibit, and asked if he'd ever done a show about the singer Madelena Delani. He just laughed and laughed: never heard of her. I called information in Chicago and got the number for the Chicago Historical Society. Once I got through to them, I asked dubiously for Rusty Lewis, who, however, did turn out to exist. Had he ever heard of Charles Gunther? "You mean the candy tycoon?" he shot back, without missing a beat. He went on to confirm every single one of the exhibit's details about Gunther—his collection, the Appomattox Surrender's historic table, even the snake skin, which remains in the Historic Society's collections to this day.

Back at the library I looked up the ethnographer Bernard Maston: no record found. I typed in "Donald R. Griffith": no record found.

AS I TELL DONALD GRIFFIN ABOUT THE PIERCING DEVILS AND THE THATCH ROOFS, THE LEAD WALLS AND THE X-RAY EMANATIONS, HE LAUGHS HARDER AND HARDER

For some reason, I tried that reference by title too—*Listening in the Dark*—and that time I hit pay dirt, except that the book had a different subtitle and its author was Donald R. Griffin, not Griffith. I went upstairs to look over the book's index but found no references to Maston, the Dozo, or any *deprong mori*. I went back downstairs, tracked down Griffin's most recent whereabouts, and called him. When I reached him, I started out by explaining about the museum (he'd never heard of it) and its exhibit about Donald R. Griffith—"Oh no," he interrupted. "My name is Griffin, with an n, not Griffith." I know, I said, I know. I went on to ask him if he'd ever heard of a bat named *Myotis lucifugus*. "Of course," he said, "That's the most common, abundant species in North America. That's why we used it on all the early research on echolocation." Did its range extend to South America? Not as far as he knew, why? As I proceeded to tell him about the piercing devils and the thatch roofs, the lead walls and the X-ray emanations, he was laughing harder and harder. Finally, calming down, he said, "No, no, none of that is me, it's all nonsense—on second thought you'd better leave the spelling of the name Griffith the way it is." He was quiet for a moment, then continued, almost wistfully, "Still, you know, it's funny. Fifty years

ago when we were first proposing the existence of something like sonar in bats, most people thought that idea no less preposterous.”

“He never ever breaks irony—that’s one of the incredible things about him.” I was talking with Marcia Tucker, the director of New York City’s New Museum, about David Wilson. It turns out there’s a growing cult among art and museum people who can’t seem to get enough of the MJT—I seemed to encounter it everywhere I turned: the L.A. County Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Getty. “When you’re in there with him,” Tucker went on, “everything initially just seems self-evidently what it is. There’s this fine line, though, between knowing you’re experiencing something and sensing that something is wrong. There’s this slight slippage, which is the very essence of the place. And Wilson’s own presence there behind the desk, the literal-minded way in which he earnestly and seemingly openly answers all your questions—it all contributes seamlessly to that sense of slippage. Visiting the Jurassic is a bit like being in psychoanalysis. The place affords this marvelous field for projection and transference. It’s like a museum, a critique of museums, and a celebration of museums—all rolled into one.”

One of the things L.A. art critic Ralph Rugoff says he most likes about the MJT is the way it deploys all the traditional signs of a museum’s institutional authority—meticulous presentation, exhaustive captions, hushed lighting, and state-

“VISITING THE JURASSIC IS A BIT LIKE BEING IN PSYCHOANALYSIS,”
SAYS ANOTHER MUSEUM DIRECTOR. “IT’S A MARVELOUS FIELD FOR
PROJECTION AND TRANSFERENCE”

of-the-art technical armature—all to subvert the very notion of the authoritative as it applies not only to itself but to any museum. The Jurassic infects its visitor with doubts—little curlicues of misgiving—that proceed to infest all his other dealings with the culturally sacrosanct. “It’s all very smart,” Rugoff insists, “and very knowing.” Very knowing, and yet at the same time utterly sincere. Rugoff told me how one day he sat alongside David’s wife, Diana, at a lecture Wilson was giving at California State University at Los Angeles. This was an early version of his *Sonnabend spiel*, which, in fact, for a long time existed solely as a lecture, only relatively recently having taken on its exhibitional form. “And he did it completely straight,” Rugoff recalls. “Everybody there was taking notes furiously, as if this were all on the level—the falls, the cones, the planes,

the whole thing. It was amazing. And at one point I leaned over to Diana and whispered, ‘This is the most incredible piece of performance art I’ve ever seen.’ And she replied, ‘What makes you think it’s a performance? David believes all this stuff.’”

As I say, I began making it a point to visit the museum on all of my trips to Los Angeles, and each time David would be there manning the desk, so that after a while I got to know him pretty well—which is to say, it felt like I got past the first layer of ironylessness to, well, maybe a second layer of ironylessness. I don’t know. Occasionally we’d talk about his own life, and it’s my impression that everything he told me was more or less true-as-stated (or, anyway, whatever I could check did check out), although, as with some of the displays, a wealth of solid detail early on began to fog over, somewhat, as one approached the present.

Born in Denver in 1946, the middle of three well-loved sons of a doctor and his wife, David started frequenting the city’s various museums from a very early age. I once asked him what had first attracted him to museums, and he replied, “Well, their museumness. How dark and hushed they were inside, the oak-and-glass cases, the sense of being in these repositories among all those old things.” But he was hardly a recluse. In fact, his mother recalls how in his early years he was enormously gregarious, extroverted, and social—a regular party animal.

Then something happened, although Wilson is loath to talk about it—he gets all shy and hesitant (as opposed to rhetorically opaque) at the prospect. “I really don’t know if I want to get into this,” he says. “It’s embarrassing, and it’s hard to put into words without sounding insipid or grandiose. But since you ask . . . Sometime late in high school—I was maybe seventeen or eighteen—my parents and brothers were away for a week and I was home by myself, when out of the blue, for no reason, I underwent this incredibly intense—well, like a conversion experience. It’s just that I came to understand the course of my life and the meaning of life in general. Like that: as if in a flash. For instance, I knew that there would be no purpose for me in pursuing the world of acquisition. The experience had religious overtones to it, but not in any specific way. It was the most intense experience I’ve ever had—an entire week in awe and euphoria. It was as if I was receiving instructions. God, do I want to be talking like this? It’s not so much that it’s embarrassing—I just don’t want to be doing the forces behind it a disservice. And I definitely don’t want to claim any specialness. It

was like something was being given to me—somewhere between a gift and an assignment—and one wants to be incredibly careful how one treats such things.

“All at once it was made completely apparent to me, though without any detail, how my life would have to follow the course that has led to ... well”—he gestured to the walls around him—“to this. I mean, I see running this museum as a service job, and that service consists in—God, I can’t believe I’m saying these things—in providing people a situation ... in fostering an environment in which people can change. And it happens. I’ve seen it happen.

“But without a doubt, that task was laid out for me in those days. The general structure was clear, even if it then took an extremely long time for me to be able to realize it, and that whole while I sensed myself waiting, stumbling around on the forest floor, confused—like that ant.”

His mother confirms how somewhere late in his high-school years David changed, became more serious—and she even lets on how, though she of course loves him both ways, maybe she slightly preferred his earlier incarnation: “He was a lot more fun as a party boy than as a Chinese philosopher.”

Soon thereafter he enrolled at Michigan’s Kalamazoo College—a small, independent school patterned along the lines of Oberlin or Reed—where he ended up majoring in urban entomology with a minor in art. His first night there he met Diana at a square-dance mixer. They became inseparable and were wed a few years later, in 1969, during the last weeks before their graduation. “Yeah,” David acknowledges. “We’ve been married for twenty-five years. It’s amazing—and believe me, every bit as amazing to us. We ought to be in one of our vitrines. But she’s incredible,” he continues, the ironylessness cracking just the slightest bit. “I can’t believe how she puts up with all this.”

After college, David and Diana moved to Chicago, where almost immediately David was called up by his draft board. He applied for conscientious-objector status, which, he says, “was granted in record time. They just looked at me and—no questions asked—I was like the dictionary definition.” Following stints performing alternative service as an orderly in various hospitals’ mental and emergency wards, and then a few years with Diana in a remote Colorado mountain cabin, David was accepted into the film program at the then newly opened California Institute of the Arts.

Cal Arts at the time was a hotbed for the coolest and most austere in formalist, avant-garde filmmaking, and David Wilson soon earned a reputation as one of the coolest, most austere filmmakers there. “Well,” David admits today,

looking back on that phase of his work, “it was the sort of thing that was moderately meaningful to a microscopically small percentage of the population at a particular moment. But clearly, in the end, it wasn’t fulfilling the mandate I’d received.” Diana says flatly, “Those films were not David.”

David continued making his formalist films through the Seventies and into the early Eighties, and though he wasn’t making any money off of them, he and Diana were nevertheless able to enjoy a very comfortable lifestyle because they were making so much money on the side doing highly sophisticated robotic special-effects camera work on the periphery of the film industry. “It was the sort of work you could do six months a year and easily coast the rest of the time,” David says. “I even enjoyed it. Technically, it was quite challenging and interesting.

But it wasn’t the kind of work where you were adding beans to the right side of the scale.”

His other life, however, was opening out. After 1980 he began making strange little dioramas on the side, exquisitely evocative miniature sensoriums, several of them featuring the same stereoscopic viewing device modeled on the catoptric (or so-called beam-splitting) camera that he’d subsequently deploy in his Iguassu Falls display. This was much closer to the mandate, as David quickly realized, and increasingly he began farming these cabinet-splendors out to various odd and far-flung venues.

And it’s here that David’s account begins to fog over. His own biography intermeshes with the museum’s. The Thums make their appearance, via Mary Rose Cannon—and it’s a bit difficult to achieve a strictly accurate chronological account, at least from him.

Diana, for her part, tells the story of how one day in 1984 she’d just finished a tai chi class when David drove over to get her. Pulling up, he waited for her to get in the car, at which point he passed her a slip of paper on which he’d scrawled the simple phrase “Museum of Jurassic Technology.”

“What’s this?” Diana asked him. “Your life’s work?” And he just smiled.

For its first several years, the Museum of Jurassic Technology had no physical base of its own; it existed in the form of “loans from the Collection” extended to scattered galleries, museums,



CUP AND SAUCER AND
A PLATE OF MADELEINES,
IN THE PROUST EXHIBIT

and community centers. Then one day, about seven years ago, while driving home from his other life's professional studio in Culver City, David noticed how a nearby storefront that he'd had his eye on for some time had suddenly become vacant. David signed a lease on the spot, taking over the 1,600 square feet. Within a year he'd reunited his museum's traveling diaspora, mounted his first exhibition, and, without the slightest flash or ceremony, simply hung his banner out and opened for business.

Passersby, on occasion, would wander in. Many would wander right back out. But some would stay and linger. David tells the story of one fellow who spent a long time in the back amid the exhibits and then, emerging, spent almost as long

graved honor roll acknowledging the support of these "patrons" in much the same spirit of parody mingled with reverence that characterizes most everything else about the museum. Other visitors began volunteering their services to sit at the desk or else to help fabricate the new installations. In talking about the museum, David continually defers authorship: he is always talking about "our" goals and what "we" are planning to do next. In part, this is one of his typical self-effacing gambits; but it's also true that the museum has generated a community—or anyway, that the museum is no longer just about what's going on "inside" David but about what's going on "between" him and the world.

That it continues to persist at all from month to month is by no means the least of its marvels. "The museum exists against all odds," David once commented to me. "Nothing supports this venture—it is woven from thin air. We apply for grants, and we've gotten a few, but most grants-dispensing agencies frankly don't know what to make of us—we don't fit into the traditional categories." The museum's annual budget currently hovers around \$50,000 (rent is \$1,800 a month, and no one receives a salary), and though David originally poured a significant portion of his own outside income into the museum, there's been less and less of that, in part because as the years passed he spent more and more time on the museum itself and in part because his exquisitely sophisticated battery of specializations has now largely been superseded by the film industry's relentless computerization. Have there been moments, I recently asked him, when he and his family have actually been at the poorhouse door? "Oh, yeah," he laughed. "Moments like now."

"I have no idea how we got this far or how we can possibly go on," Diana told me one day. Technically, she's the museum's treasurer and keeper of accounts, though she admits that in that official capacity she's often reduced to giggling fits. "I've just developed this fairy faith in last-minute providence. At the outset of each month, there's no way we're going to make it through, but something always comes up—a small bequest, a grant unexpectedly approved, a slight uptick in admissions. But David keeps pushing the limit. Last year he took his other company into bankruptcy and doubled the size of the museum on the same day—and the crazy thing is, *I wanted him to do it!* He was right to do it. And we got lucky, because almost immediately after that my car got stolen, so we were able to pour the \$6,750 settlement from that into the museum."

One day as I was reading about the earliest museums, those ur-collections back in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—which were



A RE-CREATION OF
GEOFFREY SONNABEND'S
ATTIC STUDY IN ILLINOIS

a time studying the pencil sharpener on his desk. "It was just a regular pencil sharpener," David assures me. "It wasn't meant to be an exhibit. But he couldn't seem to get enough of it." And he tells another story about an old Jamaican gentleman named John Thomas who also spent a long time in the back and then came out literally crying. "He said, 'I realize this is a museum, but to me it's more like a church.'" David seems equally—and almost equivalently—moved by both stories. (In a way, they're the same story.)

Occasionally visitors are moved to offer more substantial financial contributions to the museum, and along a wall in the foyer there's an en-

sometimes called *Wunderkammern*, wonder-cabinets—it occurred to me how the Museum of Jurassic Technology truly is their worthy heir inasmuch as wonder, broadly conceived, is its unifying theme. (“Part of the assigned task,” David once told me, “is to reintegrate people to wonder.”) But it’s a special kind of wonder, and it’s metastable. The visitor to the Museum of Jurassic Technology continually finds himself shimmering between wondering-at (the marvels of nature) and wondering-whether (any of this could possibly be true). And it’s that very shimmer, the capacity for such delicious confusion, Wilson sometimes seems to suggest, that may constitute the most blessedly wonderful thing about being human.

I recently had occasion to raise the point with John Walsh, the director of the Getty Museum and another fan of the MJT. We were talking about *Wunderkammern* and some of the museum’s other antecedents. “Most of the institutional-historical allusions at Wilson’s museum turn out to be true,” Walsh told me. “There was a Musaeum Tradescantianum and a John Tradescant—in fact two of them, an Elder and a Younger—who during the 1600s built up a famously eclectic cabinet known as ‘The Ark’ in Lambeth on the South Bank, in London, most of the contents of which devolved to Elias Ashmole, who expanded upon them and then donated the whole collection to Oxford University, where it became the basis for the Ashmolean. There was a Swammerdam, and there was an Olaus Worm with his Museum Wormianum; and Charles Willson Peale did have his museum in Philadelphia, to which Benjamin Franklin donated the carcass of an Angora cat and where you could also see a mastadon and mechanical devices like the Eidophusikon, which showed primitive movies. Ever since the late Renaissance, these sorts of collections got referred to as *Kunst- und-Wunderkammern*. Technically, the term describes a collection of a type that has pretty much disappeared today—with the exception, perhaps, of the Jurassic—where natural wonders were displayed alongside works of art and various man-made feats of ingenuity. It’s only much later, in the nineteenth century, that you see the breakup into separate art, natural-history, and technology museums. But in the earlier collections, you had the wonders of God spread out there cheek by jowl with the wonders of man, both presented as aspects of the same thing, which is to say, the Wonder of God.”

I asked Walsh about some of the relics and bizarre curiosa that used to make it into those collections right alongside the legitimate stuff: the hair from the beard of Noah, the plank from the

Ark, the woman’s horn. I mentioned how I always figured some of those early museum men must have been being ironical in including them.

“Well,” Walsh said, “there’s a whole big side industry in twentieth-century criticism that consists primarily of imputing irony to prior ages. But no, no, I don’t think they were being ironical at all. They were in dead earnest.”

I tried out on Walsh my notion about the metastability of wonder at the Jurassic, with its corollary about the deliciousness of that frisson between wondering-at and wondering-whether, and Walsh interrupted, “All that’s true, that seems right to me, but you have to understand that that deliciousness is a distinctly contemporary taste. That’s not even modern. Neither Cézanne nor Picasso would have related to it.

That’s 1980s, maybe even just the Nineties.”

I was talking with David in the back room of the museum one afternoon on my most recent visit to L.A. It was a weekday—the museum was closed—and our conversation had turned to the subject of Hagop Sandaldjian, a Soviet-Armenian micro-miniaturist sculptor (who’d apparently actually existed, though he’d recently passed away) whose astonishing lifework, consisting of miniature renditions of subjects ranging from Snow White and

THE VISITOR TO THE MUSEUM SHIMMERS BETWEEN WONDERING-AT
(THE MARVELS OF NATURE) AND WONDERING-WHETHER (ANY
OF THIS COULD POSSIBLY BE TRUE)

the Seven Dwarfs to Pope John Paul II painstakingly suspended in the eye of a needle, had been the subject of a recent retrospective at the Jurassic. Free-associating, I mentioned the cabalistic doctrine of the Thirty-Six Just Men—how at any given moment there are thirty-six ethically just men in the world, unknown, perhaps, even to themselves, without whose pillarlike solidity all of Creation could crumble. Maybe, I suggested, there are thirty-six *aesthetically* just men as well.

David looked at me, authentically noncomprehending. “I don’t understand the difference,” he said.

He was quiet a few moments, and once again the ironylessness seemed momentarily to crack. “You know, certain aspects of this museum you can peel away very easily, but the reality behind, once you peel away those relatively easy layers, is more amazing still than anything those initial layers purport to be. The first layers are just a filter.”

He was quiet another few moments, and just as surely I could sense that the crack was closing up once again, the facade of ironylessness reasserting itself inviolate.

I mentioned the stink ant.

"See," he said, "that's an example of the thing about layers. Because at one level, that display works as pure information, as just this incredibly interesting case study in symbiosis, one of those adaptations so curious and ingenious and wonderful that they almost lead you to question the principle of natural selection itself. Could random mutation through geologic time be enough to account for that and so many similar splendors? Nature is more incredible than anything one can imagine.

"But at another level," David continued, "we were drawn to that particular instance because it seemed so metaphorical. That's one of our mottoes here at the museum: *UT TRANSLATIO NATURA—NATURE AS METAPHOR*. I mean, there've been times in my own life when I felt exactly like that ant—impelled, as if possessed, to do things that defy all common sense. That ant is me. I couldn't have summed up my own life better if I'd made him up all by myself."

"But David," I wanted to say (and didn't).

"You did make him up all by yourself."

Shortly after, back home in my office, I had a phone conversation about something entirely different with Tom Eisner, the eminent Cornell University biologist. In passing I mentioned Bernard Maston, the *deprong mori*, and Donald Griffith—"That's Griffin," Eisner interrupted, with an *i-n*, not a *t-h*." I know, I said, I know. "Funny about Griffin," Eisner continued. "He's a great scientist and a dear friend of mine. In fact, years ago, as a graduate student at Harvard, I inherited my first lab from him. There was still this wonderful weird grid of holes drilled into the walls, holes that had once held the anchors onto which he'd attached the maze of wires crisscrossing the room which formed the basis for his original research proving that bats could navigate in the dark. That lab had a marvelous history. Immediately before Griffin it had been occupied by Alfred Kinsey, the entomologist who did such terrific groundbreaking work on reproduction among the cynipid wasps—that is, before he abandoned the field entirely to concentrate on human sexuality instead."

I read Eisner some passages from the *deprong mori* brochure, and he laughed and seemed to love them. "That's wonderful," he said, not the least bit miffed. "That's exactly what it's like when you're out there in the field and you're first encountering some of those marvelously strange natural adaptations. At first all you've got is a few disconnected pieces of raw observation, the sheerest glimpses, but you let your mind go, fantasizing the possible connections, projecting the most fanciful life cycles. In a way it's my favorite part of being a scientist—later on, sure, you

have to batten things down, contrive more rigorous hypotheses and the experiments through which to check them out, everything all clean and careful. But that first take—those first fantasies. Those are the best. And that's the very spirit your museum man appears to have captured. Good for him."

I decided to try the stink ant out on Eisner. Wait until you hear this, I told him, this one is even funnier. Whereupon I proceeded to read him the first few paragraphs of this very piece right off my computer screen. He listened attentively, audibly harrumphing his concurrence every few sentences. "Yup," he said. "Yup. Yup." When I'd finished, he said, "So, where's the joke? All of that stuff is basically true."

I was struck almost speechless. Really? I stammered.

"Oh, absolutely. I mean, I don't know the names exactly—they're not precisely my field, so I'm a little rusty on those ants. But let's see: *Megaloponera foetens*, you say? I don't think *Megaloponera* exists, but there is a genus that used to go by the name *Megaponera*, although—it gets a little complicated—lately I'm told it's been folded into another category called *Pachycondyla*. And there is an African ant called *Pachycondyla analis*. *Foetens* is smelly, but *analis* is even more smelly. And I believe that that ant does stridulate—it's not a cry exactly, but it does produce this faint chirping sound. As for whether a *Pachycondyla* ingests the spore that way, I'm not sure. But there are several other species that do, some of them right here in the United States. For instance, down in Florida there's an ant—*Camponotus floridanus*—that inhales or anyway somehow takes in spores of the *Cordyceps* fungus, and occasionally you will indeed come upon those ants, far from home, high up the stalk of some tall blade of grass, for instance. Their mandibles will be clamped onto the blade and they'll be quite dead, a long, thin, curved, pink candlesticklike protrusion growing out from their head. And that's the fungus, getting set to shed spores. No, no," Eisner laughed, delighted. "That's all true. Just goes to show: nature is incredible—no way, no way this could all have been created in just six days." (That was great: every bit as wonder-struck as Wilson, Eisner had derived exactly the opposite evolutionary conclusion from the likes of the stink ant.) "In fact," he continued, "wait a second, I think—yeah—my wife, Maria, and I photographed one of those a while back down in Florida. You got a fax?"

I gave him the number.

"Just a second," he said, and rang off.

And sure enough, just a few moments later, a photo of a dead *Camponotus floridanus*, his forehead gloriously rampant, came coursing up from out of my machine. ■