

# MARX ET CO REVISITED. REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ECONOMY IN RALF ANDTBACKA'S *WUNDERKAMMER* (2008)

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## ABSTRACT

The present article studies the representation of economy in *Wunderkammer* (2008), a collection of poetry by Finland-Swedish author Ralf Andtbacka. Going back to the historical form of cabinets of curiosities, *Wunderkammer* depicts acts of buying, selling, and collecting. By showing the connectivity of objects and their impact on human subjects, Andtbacka actualizes and deconstructs topics originally initiated by Karl Marx, such as value, fetish, commodification, and alienation. The portrayal of capitalism, both past and present, in the book is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, collecting functions as a critical, anticapitalistic act. On the other hand, economic discourse has invaded the text and turned the author into a writing machine powered by the energy of neoliberal labor. Besides an excess of objects, the poems display an overflow of information, a characteristic feature of a postcapitalist economy. As an example of cognitive mapping, *Wunderkammer* allegorically portrays humans, objects, and information in the middle of a paradoxical economic transformation.

## KEYWORDS

Ralf Andtbacka, Experimental Poetry, Economy, Value, Marx, Post-capitalism, Cognitive Mapping

## INTRODUCTION

“To the Marchants of the Ginne Company & the Couldcost  
Mr. Humfrie Slainy Captain Crispe & Mr. Clobery & Mr. John  
Wood cape marchant. / The things Desyred from those parts  
Be theese in primis on Ellophants head with the teeth In it very  
larg [...]”<sup>1</sup>

These words in old English introduce an order of “Any thing that Is strang” that an anonymous writer wishes the merchants and captains to bring back from their journey. Then follows a long list of various things: exotic animals, plants, and stones, elephant heads, fish, and seeds. We meet an individual who desires rare objects from abroad, can afford them, and has connections to people who can fulfill these expectations. The reader encounters this letter on the second page of *Wunderkammer*, Finland-Swedish author Ralf Andtbacka’s fifth collection of poetry.

*Wunderkammer* depicts collecting and is, in and of itself, a huge collection. The poems included in the book consist of lists of various kinds: of literary representations of collections of objects, depictions of the psyche of the collector, and the many possible ways of organizing a collection. Julia Tidigs has aptly described it as “encyclopedic,” because of its “expansive net of motifs ranging from the collection of names and objects to the relationship between poem and reader.”<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, many of the poems are about buying and selling and use economic language with direct and indirect references to money, capital, fetishes, and reification. An economic discussion also takes place on a meta-level as the book describes the passion of owning, the prices of objects, and the logics of commerce. In addition, the poems that consist of catalogues of things relate to colonialism and consumerism. Between the lines, the book tells a story of the economic development of the Western world and is a partly humorous, partly critical depiction of how capitalism transforms humans, things, language, and literature. Thus, the initial order of strange things immediately introduces us to (one of) the central topics and contexts of this experimental collection of poetry—namely, buying and selling, consumption, capitalism, and colonialism. In short: it begins with a presentation of the historical background of the present economic system and situation.

In this article, I examine some of the ways in which *Wunderkammer* discusses money and forms of production as they pertain to capitalism. When studied in terms of economic

discourse—such as value, the relation between subject and object, forms of labor, and knowledge—the book reveals several topics of interest. I have discussed these themes in previous work and will begin by presenting my findings so far.<sup>3</sup> Later, however, I have noticed that when writing about economy and contemporary literature, my colleagues and I operate with a rather automatic critical attitude towards the neoliberal market economy. In our articles, we frequently describe late capitalism in terms of alienation and commodification of all aspects of human life.<sup>4</sup> Such an all-inclusive frame of interpretation makes one feel that a re-evaluation is necessary—after all, a questioning of (one’s own) automatized thinking is one of the more important scholarly tasks.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, I will develop my earlier work further by referring to two recent re-evaluations of capitalism: one that looks at markets and money in terms of connectivity rather than disintegration, and second, a presumed postcapitalism put forward by information technology. Taking his point of departure in a Latourian view on money as a non-human actor in human societies, Martijn Konings emphasizes the role of money and economy in “the expansion of network connections and the constitution of these new alliances as part of objective social facts.”<sup>6</sup> His perspective relates to the emotional and relational dynamics of everyday economic activity. Konings sees the influence of Karl Polanyi’s critique of capitalism as important for the current views within social sciences and criticizes contemporary progressive thought for being incapable to grasp the affective life of economy.<sup>7</sup> The Polanyian thought includes a depiction of economy as a corrosive, fragmentational force.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, we “deny money’s iconic characteristics, its pragmatic origins and complex connectedness.”<sup>9</sup> Paul Mason, for his part, strives to replace neoliberalism by sketching a (utopian) economic model for the information age. According to Mason, the technological development has come to a point where current capitalism is no longer able to adapt to the changes that have taken place. His major argument is that due to the rise of new technologies, information now has a spontaneous tendency to dissolve markets, destroy ownership and break down the relation between work and wages. In short: the old factors of production—land, labor, and capital—have become secondary to information.<sup>10</sup> Approaching the topic from two different directions, both Konings and Mason offer novel perspectives on the characteristic features of capitalism, its current state, and its impact on human societies. What I find important is that they put forward alternatives to the

all-inclusive frame of the disembedding effects of late capitalism. They might both be described as post-Marxist thinkers; while inspired by Marx and his followers, they criticize and develop Marx's theory of economy and society.

In what follows, I will turn to some of Koning's and Mason's ideas in my analysis of the depiction of economy in *Wunderkammer*, which, I argue, offers a highly nuanced re-evaluation of capitalism. First, however, the concept of value allows me to demonstrate how Andtbacka's book describes the effects of capitalism on people, human relations, objects, and milieus. *Wunderkammer* deconstructs (economic) value; it replaces exchange value with collector's value. The miracle alluded to by the word "wunder," performed by this cabinet of curiosities lies in how it turns trash into treasure. The book is, however, highly ambivalent when it comes to capitalism. On the one hand, it performs a truly anticapitalistic act, while, on the other, it portrays the connectivity of money as suggested by Konings. Moreover, I will study the role played by information in the book, and thus relate it to some of Mason's ideas about the characteristic features of a postcapitalist model of economy. It is noteworthy that the poems, besides an excess of objects, display an overflow of information, a feature that has not yet been discussed. I will argue that this overflow of information functions as a portrayal of the latest phase of capitalism.

I will give a couple of examples of the various ways in which economic discourse infiltrates *Wunderkammer* on several levels. I ask: what is the meaning of the economic discourse in Andtbacka's text? Is it merely there to show how economy already permeates every level of our existence? How should I interpret the presence of money in it? How does it describe capitalism, and does it offer alternatives?

The first signal of the book's relation to the development of capitalism comes already in the title. In a passage entitled "Wunderkammer" at the end of the book, one reads that collections of rare, exotic objects became popular in Europe during the sixteenth century.<sup>11</sup> The collections were, according to the author, ways of structuring the world, and products of the expansion of knowledge due to the great journeys of exploration. Andtbacka repeatedly exposes the book's relation to a historical tradition. The cabinets of curiosities, also called *Kunstkammer* or *Wunderkammer*, were collections of objects from various parts of the world, manmade as well as found objects, often valuable and rare pieces. They were rooms or cabinets filled with objects

that the collector had gathered according to a special logic, the principle of pertinence.<sup>12</sup> The objects ordered from the merchants of Ginne Company would thus be perfectly suitable for a cabinet of curiosities. According to Horst Bredekamp, who has studied cabinets of curiosities from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, *Kunstkammer* demonstrated their owner's wish to understand "the earth in its horizontal, spatial entirety."<sup>13</sup> As such, they were products of people's expanding knowledge of the world, of colonialism and global commerce.

The existence of cabinets of curiosities in the past, as well as in the present, emphasizes the global circulation of knowledge, objects, images, and ways of thought. Already during the era between 1400 and 1800, called by historians "the first global age," a wide range of goods circulated across continents and global markets, the merchants of the Ginne Company being but one example of this international trade.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the cabinets of curiosities might be apprehended as a form of "cognitive mapping," the term used by Fredric Jameson to describe "the self-conscious attempt by individual and collective subjects to represent and to situate themselves in relation to an unrepresentable social totality."<sup>15</sup> The need for cognitive mapping, through all kinds of figures and narrative representations, goes back to the development of capitalism and global colonial networks. As individual subjects, we are all inserted in multidimensional sets of radically discontinuous realities, and unable to understand our position in the world.<sup>16</sup>

According to Jameson, the development of capitalism and the expansion of capital led to a "growing contradiction between lived experience and structure": the phenomenological experience of the individual subject, "no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place."<sup>17</sup> Instead, the lived experience of life in London is conditioned by the entire colonial system of the British Empire that determines the quality of the individual's life, Jameson explains. Seeing cabinets of curiosities as a form of cognitive mapping enables us to scrutinize artistic forms and traditions as forms of knowledge and methods for understanding ongoing transformations. The cabinet of curiosity functions here as a mode of figuration, an allegorical way to grasp glimpses of an absent cause, the enormous global reality inaccessible for individual subjects. Consequently, *Wunderkammer* is an allegorical representation of the current state of capitalism as well as an archive of its earlier phases, effects and logics.

VALUE, FUNCTIONALITY AND THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED  
Value and transactions of various kinds are the topics that *Wunderkammer* frequently discusses. They have, of course, an obvious connection to the economy and economic discourse. The collection of poetry includes some ironic allusions even to literary value, but above all, it is concerned with economic value.

*Wunderkammer* is a book that is characterized by excess. It practices, thematizes, even exaggerates excess. There is just too much of everything in it. Many of the poems consist of long and exhausting lists of words, objects, developments, phenomena, forms of expression, information. The collecting activity that takes place in the poems happens in the flea markets and shops in Vasa, a city on the west coast of Finland, and in an old factory where the poetic I, identified also as the author of the book, has his working room entitled “Wunderkammer.” Moreover, the author uses collecting as one of his major methods in the book. *Andtbacka* includes many types of poetry: poems, which have the form of inventories and catalogues, poetry created by using a search engine or a poems generator, assemblages of objects, collections of words, ways of speech and forms of language, genres, and styles. One of the openings poems, “Ting” (Thing), offers an example of how the book studies objects, collections and value:

*THERE is something special  
about things.*

*How they gather, silently calm;  
how they scatter, if one so wishes.*

...

scrap, litter and remainders  
flanges, feathers, rotten mattresses  
odd devices  
that stopped working a long time ago

...

arc de triomphe, big ben, the little mermaid  
scrapbooks, mail order catalogues  
spiral galaxies, specs of dust  
horns of unicorn, nuts, odds and ends

...

things you would take with you to a deserted island  
things you would bring back home from the deserted island  
ammonites, belemnites, monsters of imagination  
an armful of stuffed birds, diverse:

...<sup>18</sup>

Flea markets, where the author-narrator-collector walks around looking for something special, something suitable to buy and collect, are in the periphery of market economy. Here, old, discarded objects circulate, and in a sense, the collector has replaced the consumer. In *Wunderkammer*, the collector embodies a question central for market economy as well as for the symbolic economy of literature: how does something become valuable? How does something lose its value? How can something worthless become valuable, and the other way around? To explain the hidden social nature of the commodity, Marx uses the concept of fetish. Fetish means concealing the fact that something (an object, a phenomenon, a development in society) is the result of human activity and presenting it as the product of “natural laws,” independent of human action. It is as if the narrator replies to this idea when he confirms the autonomous nature of his collection: “There is something special about the things.” Repeatedly, the objects collected in *Wunderkammer* become fetishes, objects with nearly magic properties that take command over the collector.

The absurd, odd character of the things listed in “Ting” soon strikes the reader. First, instead of picking out only a couple of the most valuable things, the poem depicts an excess of objects. Second, although the project of this cabinet of curiosities is similar to that of its predecessor, namely, to map the entire globe by collecting things, here the global space is full of nonfunctional objects, old, useless or unusual things. The several hundred years of development of capitalism, consumerism, and global commerce has resulted in a world that has become a junk space.<sup>19</sup>

The objects depicted have one thing in common: their value, or rather, the opposite of it, as they are worthless. The collection consists of worn out parts of machines, or useless parts of nature; unknown objects, without any use value; and, finally objects that do not really exist, which can then be used for nothing. The objects listed are either useless, nonfunctional or impossible to own. During the Renaissance in Italy, cabinets of curiosities were single rooms, extravagant, fanciful spaces displaying the rare and unusual artifacts that belonged to elites.<sup>20</sup> Hence, “Ting” provides an ironic response to traditional cabinets of curiosities, as the objects in it are anything but the best of their kind. “Ting” can also be scrutinized in relation to the development of economies in general. While the production of use value reigned in traditional and pre-modern societies, a striving for surplus value through the exploitation of labor dominates the production of things within capitalism. In the light of consumer capitalism, to collect

used, unwanted, superfluous things might be an alternative, even ironic or revolutionary act. What's more, the things listed have one common feature: they exist outside value as it was defined by Marx. They have no use value or exchange value anymore, nor do they relate to value understood as the abstract labor time needed to produce a commodity. Once, some of the things listed were commodities, but no longer. Furthermore, the objects miraculously obtain new value, as collection value displaces use value as well as exchange value. After all, anything can become valuable for a collector, depending on what he/she decides to collect. Overall, *Wunderkammer* describes the power of commodification and fetishes, but also their opposite: the magical power of objects vanishes, and the worthless and the priceless exchange places. The poems turn the relation of the objects to their producers or owners upside down: they repeatedly show the power of things over human beings.

In a similar way, the poem "Cigarrlåda" reflects upon the paradoxical nature of value and price. A man, a collector, goes into a shop of antiquities where he holds a cigar box without a price tag in his hands. The owner of the shop studies the customer and measures his desire: "The value rises for each moment / he [the customer] hesitates; soon the holder will not have the means / to accept the price the man will never be able to / pay, how much he ever wishes to: [...]."<sup>21</sup> The scene circulates around price and monetary value. On the one hand, it is an empty category; there is no price tag on this useless object. On the other hand, the situation is complex and loaded with emotions, power, and desire. Andtbacka not only elaborates, mixes and transforms the forms of value Marx put forward, but he also questions the idea that all prices are the result of a choice by a rational individual, based on what a buyer is willing to pay for an object at a given moment, and dependent on the utility and quantity of the objects.<sup>22</sup> The poem brings forward instead the irrational dimension of a seemingly rational economic exchange. The value of the cigar box will be a result of the relation between the two men observing each other, but neither of them seems to be able to make a decision about the price or the value of it. The situation ends up in a paradox: there is a supply and a demand, but no trade. The buyer nor the seller are free; on the contrary, they are both paralysed by the hidden desires present in exchange. Simultaneously, however, the poem exposes the productive power of money. The absence of a price tag makes human action impossible.



Francisco Orlando, who has studied representations of useless objects in literature from a psychoanalytical point of view, argues that collections of objects without function is a way to question the logic of rationality, which forms the basis of the capitalist economy.<sup>23</sup> He sees literature as “an imaginary site of a return of the repressed”: the immoral, irrational and antifunctional.<sup>24</sup> While Marx states that the wealth of capitalist societies presents itself in the immense accumulation of commodities, Orlando inverts Marx’s statement in *Capital*, volume 1, in the following way: “The *literature* of those societies in which the capitalistic mode of production prevails, presents itself at first sight as ‘an immense accumulation of *anticommodities*’.”<sup>25</sup> The economic paradox put forward in the poem “Cigarrlåda” is a way to make visible the irrationality of capitalism. Not only are the hidden desires of the buyer and seller at play. In addition, *Wunderkammer*’s overall depiction of useless, anti-functional objects and waste exposes and expresses the repressed side of the capitalist mode of production. Andtbacka’s book is one such immense accumulation of anticommodities that Orlando suggests the literature of capitalism is generally.

The historical merchants introduced at the beginning of the book meet their contemporary colleagues later on. The poem entitled “Centripetalt, centrifugalt” referring to two forms of acceleration of objects with regard to a center opens with an instruction given by a merchant to his helper in the flea market, “*De tings must be in order. Den de coustumers buy better.*”<sup>26</sup> The collector-author uses an explicitly economic language, as he comments upon the merchant: “His pricing fluctuates.”<sup>27</sup> At times, worthless things have high prices, and valuable things are cheap, but this particular merchant always puts too high a price on his goods. Repeatedly, value is shown to be all but stable. Ironically, the ordering of items, which the poem announces as a way to induce customers to buy, is reminiscent of the actions of the author of *Wunderkammer*: he also collects, organizes, uses found objects and found material. Collecting and arranging connects Andtbacka to many other contemporary authors and artists—arguably, the collector has replaced the creator in contemporary literature, and a collage has become the most typical form of art. This becomes visible in *Wunderkammer* as well as in contemporary poetry: in their frequent use of found objects and found linguistic material, altered or unaltered, and in poetry generated by piling and manipulating language and information from the internet. This poetic strategy, used already

by avant-garde poets at the beginning of the twentieth century, has become even more prevalent in contemporary literature.<sup>28</sup> In *Wunderkammer*, the majority of the poems are collections in themselves, and contribute to the overall collection comprising the book.

#### THE RELATION BETWEEN SUBJECT AND OBJECT

The objects collected are not limited to things only. Words, sentences, and ideas, some found on the internet, intermingle in this collection. Even theoretical discussions put forward by Karl Marx as well as other scientists and economists in the nineteenth century are incorporated and parodied. One of the topics that makes the reader aware of the presence of Marxist ideas is the relation between subjects and objects, which repeatedly becomes inverted and transformed.

In the long poem “Naturalia & artificialia,” one more explicit allusion to the cabinets of curiosities in which categories of artificialia and naturalia were common,<sup>29</sup> the author-collector organizes his collections according to the categories of “Aqua,” “Aer,” “Ignis,” and “Terra.” The poem’s categories include long descriptions of what they contain, depictions of the conditions in which the objects are observed or found, and philosophical reflections upon the principles of collecting. The section “Terra” is dedicated to Homer and Langley Collyer, two brothers in New York who became famous because of their outstanding achievements as collectors. In 1947, both were found dead in their home, surrounded by the immense amounts of rubbish and items of various kinds.<sup>30</sup> The poem thus starts ironically by arguing that collecting is an important factor in the survival of human species. Twice it states that public or state ownership is the worst enemy of nature. One passage may exemplify the poem’s excessive ways of piling things up, and filling up of all free spaces, reminiscent of the Collyer brothers’ collecting habits:

One can collect beyond all rational principles, in ways of random, manic, neurotic, possessed, because the *objets trouvés* of surrealism have already for long been dreamt into pieces, erased and emptied, like oceans depleted of fish, sunken storage rooms, enormous hangars for Zeppelins to be filled again, hearts and senses to be filled, and memories, the entire net will be filled with mouths, cunts and rumps will be filled with all kinds of junk, with utopias that have died out of themselves and smoldering ashes of stars, with all you never

ever understood that you nor even your lost twin would need on a boundless market, because regulation by the state is the number one enemy of nature.<sup>31</sup>

The reference to the Collyer brothers actualizes the mad, boundless, and destructive sides of collecting. Water and air, the two elements in nature that are indeed necessary for the survival of human and can, as Marx states in *Capital*, offer use value without having exchange value because their utility does not depend on labor. Nature here, however, becomes ambivalent: not only water and air, but also the “nature” of neocapitalism (boundless market, critique of the regulation by the state), which in turn leads to the destruction of nature (empty oceans). The poem even expresses a wish that everything in the world could be owned by someone and be included “... in His private cabinet of art and natural history: universe on the scale 1:1,”<sup>32</sup> thus bringing together unlimited private ownership and cabinets of curiosities. “Terra,” the earth, turns out to be a parody of liberal capitalism and consumerism: it imitates the discourse of capitalism, but combines it with death and destruction. Its depiction of the excess of all kinds of junk in the name of commerce without boundaries makes it even more parodic.

Finally, the poem ends with a sentence, which, I think, parodies the ideas of Marx concerning the relation between subjects and objects, ownership and commodities: “And all will be good and everything will turn out good, when the thing and the owner become one.”<sup>33</sup> The relation between subjects and objects, workers and the products of their labor is the central question of alienation. Marx thought that in a capitalist system of industrial labor, workers become alienated from the results of their work, from themselves and from their humanity. They lose a meaningful relation to their own actions as purposeful and to themselves as subjects with intentions, as they are forced to produce objects, the content, direction and form of which are determined by the capitalist. Survival is fundamentally dependent upon co-operation with others, as humans are social animals, but in capitalism every individual worker becomes a mechanistic part of production and his labor is reduced to a commodity. Consequently, human relations become commodified, that is, the objects of selling and buying. Andtbacka’s poem comments on alienation in a parodic way: the poem promises a better future in the final merging of object and the owner. Forget about the worker and his right to the objects he has produced: it is the owner’s relation to the things he owns that is the source of happiness. Forget about the relations

between humans in the society: what counts is objects, and the relation of human to things. Humans should strive for a total merging with things, a condition within which the boundaries between subjects and objects disappear. This is but the language of the market exposed, and parodically repeated. It reverses, in a humorous way, the alienation brought about by capitalism. From a Marxist point of view, what it offers is a comic dystopia.

Similarly, the boundaries between subject and object, and owner and object, become transformed in the poem “Tillfällighetsdikt” but in a much less humorous way. This poem imitates and mocks the bond between individualism, ownership, and sexuality, and the way sexual desire is implicated in commerce. It starts with an innocent address to the reader: “Hi, you there,”<sup>34</sup> after which the narrator proceeds to the costs of the poem for the recipient: “I am your personal occasional poem. For how long is up to you to decide. You are the one who pays, in time if not in something else.”<sup>35</sup> The poem thus posits itself as a commodity, and the reader as a buyer. The poem then describes penetration, as the text moves line by line deeper into the reader who has now become the object of the poem. Simultaneously, the language of the poem becomes more and more pornographic and threatening: “I am already six lines in you. Do you want me longer in? Unfortunately, I cannot hear what you say; I only hear my own echo. But let us continue. I think you wish that.”<sup>36</sup> What starts by turning to the free will of the reader-consumer ends as an act of violence towards her.

Another consequence of the capitalist mode of production is that of amnesia, put forward in “Brändöelegierna”: “All relations in a late capitalist society transform into, / yes, what they transform into, is hard to remember: / on the desk a candle snuffer, a paper knife, a tape punch. / We eat them like fair trade fruits.”<sup>37</sup> I have already discussed this passage earlier as a self-reflexive analysis of the present state of late capitalism: the commodification process has reached its uttermost phase resulting in a total amnesia when it comes to the relation between subjects and objects. Here, Andtbacka also playfully parodies the analyses and discourse of Marxist scholars on current capitalism.<sup>38</sup> Konings argues that processes of “forgetting” are not necessarily signs of fetishism. Forgetting might also endorse an intimate familiarity—certain things are so familiar that we are not able to see them. Therefore, it bears witness of our ability to grasp a complex network of connections as a coherent unity.<sup>39</sup> Again, Andtbacka turns to paradox. The relation between the

objects on the table and the observer is absurd and impossible—you cannot eat objects such as paper knives; nevertheless, you are made aware of ethical production as a demand on the late modern consumer. The depiction shows that “we” have indeed forgotten how to use the things described. In addition, the next verse of this elegy urges us to forget still more. The narrator advises us to overlook “that tone” and “that thing,” and to think of other ones, which desire nothing from us.<sup>40</sup> Disremembering is thus both a consequence of fetishism, and an act, which serves as a way to cope in the late capitalist society.

In the poem “Naturalia & artificialia,” the happy end is the complete merging of objects and their owners. Konings questions the traditional critique of capitalism for its negative views of economy and money, especially its externalizing and disembedding effects. In Marxist theory, these concerns are expressed in the concepts of commodity fetishism and reification.<sup>41</sup> Konings asserts the opposite, money’s inherent connectivity, its ability to create relations, constitutive associations and attachments.<sup>42</sup> *Wunderkammer* in its turn represents yet another viewpoint: it clearly shows that capitalism and its effects on human beings, objects, language, and societies, are not neither-nor, but both-and. Transactions certainly create connectivity, as Andtbacka’s poems show, for example in the encounter of the seller and the buyer of the cigar box, and in the complete merging of subject and object. They, however, also bring about destruction and death, paradoxical situations without solution, disappearance of individual subjects and human beings, even violence.

Overall, *Wunderkammer* scrutinizes the ways in which economic discourse creates subjectivity, and the kinds of subjectivity it produces. The subject, the “I” speaking, is similar to objects and things: produced for certain purposes, in similar kinds of processes and production lines. Thus, the utilitarian, instrumentally rational individual of modernization has been replaced, at least partly, by an associative conception of the self.<sup>43</sup>

## FORMS OF LABOR

The word “Wunderkammer” occurs in Andtbacka’s book several times and has a number of meanings. One of the poems entitled “Wunderkammer” depicts various forms of production and is therefore of relevance here. In this poem, the author states at the beginning: “EVEN I get at times the question / what it is that makes me write. / Let me explain”.<sup>44</sup> The writer/narrator in the

poem then starts to describe the view from his workroom desk to a gym in another part of the old factory building where he works. What he sees is strange: he has a partial view of people doing their exercises at various apparatuses; what he sees are legs running on running carpets, using exercise bikes, training the inner thigh muscles in what resembles a gynecological examination table—all this is described as a “concert of anonymous movement.”<sup>45</sup> He then describes how the power produced by gym exercisers is connected to various kinds of cables, both old-fashioned and new, which force their way through the walls of the building and continue all the way through the earth’s crust to the earth’s core. There, they make a U-turn, making their way up to his part of the factory, through the corridor on the third level, and opening up a door that has the text “Wunderkammer” written on it with white letters against a black background. Having forced their way into the room, the cables sneak up to the author, who sits at a table facing his computer, and connect to his brain. “Approximately like this is how I imagine it all to be,” he closes the poem.<sup>46</sup>

The poem contains allusions to various phases of labor and capitalism. The writing room resides in an old factory, which hosted spinning industry in the first phase of Finnish industrialization in the nineteenth century. Later on, the author-narrator tells us that the factory was built for a company established in Finland in the 1820s by Scottish manufacturer James Finlayson, the father of Finnish industry. Now the factory is a place for sports, where the workers of the twenty-first century keep their bodies fit, and for artists. Machines, which started replacing human labor from the eighteenth century onwards, returned in their present-day version, to offer humans physical work once again. However, the factory also turned into a site for creative mental activity of a writer. Creative work is often seen as a privileged site of aesthetics and as inherently different from other modes of production. Here, on the contrary, the physical labor has been replaced by creative work, signaling a major shift towards economy centred on creativity and authorship.

The factory represents the industrial history of capitalism, while the office where the author sits with his computer constitutes the key place of production in the twenty-first century. His writing however is not the product of creative inspiration, but the result of the muscle energy produced by the people at the gym. The author becomes part of an assemblage of human-machine-energy, transformed this way into a machine for production of text. He rents an office in a former factory; he is an intellectual worker

producing a text with aesthetic and critical content. When the book is finished, it becomes a product offered on the market—a commodity to be bought and consumed.

#### KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION INTRODUCING NEW FORMS OF WORK AND ECONOMY

The book not only introduces its reader to endless lists of objects, it also presents an abundance of data which has consequences for the kind of economy depicted in *Wunderkammer*, that of selling and buying things. As Mason states, information is different from any other product; it can be reproduced freely in endless amounts without changing, it does not degrade with use, it is copyable and shareable, one person consuming it does not prevent another person from using it.<sup>47</sup> This has huge consequences for the market. Mason summarizes the situation as follows: “[...] the basic law of economics was that everything is scarce. Supply and demand assume scarcity. Now certain goods are not scarce, they are abundant—so supply and demand become irrelevant.”<sup>48</sup> Abundance of information, then, corrodes capitalism and thus becomes the precondition of postcapitalism.<sup>49</sup>

*Wunderkammer* describes precisely this kind of information economy. If collecting was the form of labor before agriculture, collecting information from the internet is a typical modern type of labor. Andtbacka shows the current relevance of an old tradition of collecting and ordering things—that of the cabinet of curiosities. In addition, the writer-collector in *Wunderkammer* is an educated and networked individual, a characteristic figure of the twenty-first century. Mason argues that the information technology has created a new kind of worker, one who gathers “knowledge from a relatively open and global system.”<sup>50</sup> In Andtbacka’s book, we are faced with information gathered from the internet, and used in a collection of poetry, perhaps using copy and paste.

The humorous description of the writer as powered by people working out at the gym in a factory of the past portrays an author made intelligent in a new and networked way.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, in this epoch of late capitalism he creates his work by collecting and transforming bits and pieces from the internet. The writer returns to the objects listed in the poem “Ting” in a poem entitled “02:56:33, 5 juni 2006”. In it, we find two lists side by side on the page; on the left hand side a list of names of the obsolete objects in “Ting,”<sup>52</sup> on the right a list of these objects as they have been updated and manipulated by a “random generator.”<sup>53</sup>

The significance of information in Andtbacka's book also leads us back to the beginning of this article, to "To the Marchants of Ginne Company." At the end of *Wunderkammer*, a note states that the letter cited on page 2 is from John Tradescant the elder to "the secretary of the admiralty" Edward Nicolas, dated July 31, 1625. Despite the fact that the reference is incorrect, (the letter is on page 6, not on page 2 as the note states), it is obvious that the note refers to the letter at the beginning. On the one hand, the book consists of information collected from various sources on the internet and contributes to our understanding of a new form of creative production. As such, it is both a portrayal of and a product of the new info-capitalism. On the other hand, much of the information is hard to understand and difficult to grasp as parts of a meaningful whole. Overall, the facts and data obtained are as abundant, fragmented and contradictory as information found on the internet. The latter is cut off from original context and lumped together according to an "irrational" logic. Therefore, much of the data collected can no longer count as 'information': facts provided by learning about something or someone. By performing a search in a search engine however, we finally learn about John Tradescant the elder, an English botanist and gardener, who at the beginning of the 17th century travelled widely collecting plants and seeds for the gardens of his employers, noble persons. He was a collector of first rank.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the citation that, at first sight, appears as an enigmatic piece of data, turns out to have its own, logical place in the book.

At the end of the book, the author explains that cabinets of curiosities were ways to represent a macrocosm through a miniature cosmos, and the collections strove to combine magic, knowledge, and aesthetics.<sup>55</sup> The tradition of cabinets of curiosities has been interpreted as an attempt to make sense of the world at a time when the amount of knowledge was fast expanding. We now face a phase in human history with even more radical and faster expansion of knowledge. The excessiveness of Andtbacka's book is then not only a result of its working method—that of collecting, but also a characteristic feature of the accelerating growth of information technologies.

#### TO CONCLUDE

"There is a growing body of evidence that information technology, far from creating a new and stable form of capitalism, is dissolving it [...]. The first people to say this were an awkward squad of philosophers, management gurus and lawyers," Paul



Mason states.<sup>56</sup> And, I would like to add, a number of authors, among them the Finland-Swedish author Ralf Andtbacka.

In *Wunderkammer*, several developments connected to work, writing, economy, and capitalism take place. First, an author is transformed from a creator into a collector. This opens up an opportunity for a play with various forms of value: surplus value, collector value, use value, market value, and aesthetic value. The value of objects such as litter, useless and worthless things, is utterly reversed, as worthless things miraculously turn into very valuable rare items. This involves also the depiction of the magic power of things over collectors, the ability of objects to turn into subjects with the authority to change the behavior of human subjects. The boundary between litter and fetish disappears, and so does the distinction between subject and object. Objects are actors that connect people and places in the massive global networks created by capitalism and colonialism. They float in from all over the world and come together in excessive piles on a flea market close to you. In this way, *Wunderkammer* depicts a global junk space that is the outcome of several hundred years of production and market economy. As such, it shows the impact of capitalism on our surroundings and on our view of ourselves, offering in that sense a return of the repressed side of the capitalist mode of production. It questions not only value, but also rationality.

On another level, the collection uses and parodies the language of capitalism as it uses words and phrases from the market and transforms the views and discourses of economic thinkers such as Karl Marx. Besides that, it offers a description of the development of capitalism by presenting various forms and phases of labor and brings them together by using the form of cabinets of curiosities. *Wunderkammer* obviously tells its reader that the present state of affairs is not altogether new. As such, cabinets of curiosities more generally, and *Wunderkammer* more specifically, function as archives of passed phases of global development, buying and selling, and writing about it. The author-collector is in a perpetual state of curiosity and wonder, collecting not only objects but also information, putting them together according to various organizing principles, and thus opening up possible ways for us to understand what is going on in the current world. The use of cabinet of curiosities is a way to describe the historical development of global commerce, and emphasizes its actuality as an artistic form in a time of exploding information. Its depiction of collecting as another, alternative form of production of value comes close to

the new forms of economy that Paul Mason discusses using the term postcapitalism. It might even be apprehended as a product of that kind of economy.

What is more, Andtbacka uses information technology when he produces literature that scrutinizes and questions the earliest categories of economic analysis: those of land, labor, and capital. He replaces them with people, ideas and things in a manner similar to contemporary analyses of development of capitalism in the information society.<sup>57</sup> Such abstract phenomena as money, capital, and finance are portrayed in Andtbacka's collection of poems as odd, absurd, humorous, and illogical phenomena and symbols without any stable value. What we view as ordinary in the economy is defamiliarized, but *Wunderkammer* also shows how money produces connections between human beings, objects and parts of the world. Andtbacka's book renders the operations of value and capital(s), past and present, visible; it makes capital in all its complex connectedness perceptible. At the end of the book, in the final text entitled "Wunderkammer", the author explains that for him cabinets of curiosities are a way to study collecting as a phenomenon, things as language, and language as thing. He concludes: "To collect is to approach thing by thing what one is not."<sup>58</sup> *Wunderkammer* leaves open the question of human identity and agency in capitalism. If we are not the things we collect—as the consumerist capitalism has assumed—what are we then? The answer is but the aesthetics of a paradox and an assemblage.

- 1 Ralf Andtbacka, *Wunderkammer. Dikter* (Helsingfors: Söderströms, 2008), 6.
- 2 Julia Tidigs, "The Tongue, the Text and the Tape Recorder: Vernacular and the Technology of Writing in Ralf Andtbacka's *Wunderkammer*," *Textual Practice* 34, no. 5 (2020): 761, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2020.1749381>
- 3 Kristina Malmio, "'De tings must be in order. Den de coustumers buy better': Kapitalismkritik i Ralf Andtbackas diktsamling *Wunderkammer*," in *Modernitetens uttryck och avtryck: Litteraturvetenskapliga studier tillägnade professor Claes Ahlund*, eds. Anna Möller-Sibelius and Freja Rudels (Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 2017), 138-148; Kristina Malmio, "Wunderkammer? Suomenruotsalainen kirjallisuus ja uusliberalistinen talous," in *Kirjallisuus nykykapitalismissa: Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden ja kulttuurin näkökulma*, eds. Jussi Ojajärvi, Erkki Sevänen and Liisa Steinby (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2018), 384-421.
- 4 Malmio, "Wunderkammer?"; Jussi Ojajärvi and Liisa Steinby, eds., *Minä ja markkinavoimat: Yksilö, kulttuuri ja yhteiskunta uusliberalismin valtakaudella* (Helsinki: Avain, 2008).
- 5 *Ibid.*, 418.
- 6 Martijn Konings, *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism: What Progressives Have Missed* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 2.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 10 Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (London: Penguin Books, Random House, 2015), xiv, 112.
- 11 Andtbacka, *Wunderkammer*, 144.
- 12 Jonas Ingvarsson, "BBB vs WWW: Digital epistemologi och litterär text från Göran Printz Pahlsson till Ralf Andtbacka," *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap* 1 (2015): 54-56.
- 13 Horst Bredekamp, *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1996), 36.
- 14 Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, "Spaces of Global Interactions. The Material Landscapes of Global History," in *Writing Material Culture History*, eds. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 111.
- 15 Robert T. Tally Jr., *Topophobia: Place, Narrative, and the Spatial Imagination* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018), 2.
- 16 Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *The Jameson Reader*, eds. Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 278-287.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 278.
- 18 "DET är någonting speciellt / med tingen. / Hur de samlas, tiger still; / hur de skingras, om man vill. / ... / skrot, skräp och rester / flänsar, fjädrar, ruttna madrasser / underliga apparater / som sedan länge slutat fungera / ... / arc de triomphe, big ben, den lille havfrue / klippböcker, postorderkataloger / spiralgalaxer, stoftkorn / enhörningshorn, spindelmuttrar, diverse / ... / det som du skulle ta med dig till en öde ö / det som du skulle ta med dig hem från en öde ö / ammoniter, belemniter, hjärnmonster / en famnfull uppstoppade fåglar, diverse:" (All translations of *Wunderkammer* are mine.) Andtbacka, *Wunderkammer*, 12.
- 19 See Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 51; Kristina Malmio, "The Miracle of the Mesh: Global Imaginary and Ecological Thinking in Ralf Andtbacka's *Wunderkammer*," in *Contemporary Nordic Literature and Spatiality*, eds. Kristina Malmio and Kaisa Kurikka (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 277-299.
- 20 Ethan W. Lasser, "The Return of the Wunderkammer: Material Culture in the Museum," in *Writing Material Culture History*, eds. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 226.
- 21 "Värdet stiger för varje ögonblick / han [the customer] tvekar; snart har innehavaren inte längre råd / att acceptera det pris som mannen aldrig kan / betala, hur gärna han än skulle vilja: [...]" Andtbacka, *Wunderkammer*, 22.
- 22 Mason, *Postcapitalism*, 160-161.
- 23 Francesco Orlando, *Obsolete Objects in the Literary Imagination: Ruins, Relics, Rarities, Rubbish, Uninhabited Places, and Hidden Treasures* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 15.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 26 Andtbacka, *Wunderkammer*, 20.
- 27 "Hans prissättning vacklar." *Ibid.*, 20.
- 28 Brian McHale, *The Obligation Towards the Difficult Whole* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 254-255.
- 29 Bredekamp, *Lure of Antiquity*, 35-36.
- 30 "Collyer Brothers," Wikipedia, last modified September 19, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collyer\\_brothers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collyer_brothers).
- 31 "Man kan samla bortom alla rationella principer, slumpmässigt, maniskt, neurotiskt, besatt, för surrealismens *objets trouvées* är för länge sedan sönderdrömda, raderade och tömda, som utfiskade oceaner, sjunkna lagerlokaler, väldiga zeppelinhangarer som igen ska fyllas, hjärtan och sinnen ska fyllas, och minnet, hela nätet ska fyllas med munnar, fittor och rumpor ska fyllas med allsköns bråte, med självdöda utopier och pyrande stjärnaska, med allt som du aldrig någonsin förstod att du, eller ens din förlorade tvilling, kunde behöva på en gränslös marknad, för statlig reglering är naturens fiende nummer ett." Andtbacka, *Wunderkammer*, 101.
- 32 "... i Hans privata konst- och naturaliekabinett: universum i skala 1:1." *Ibid.*, 101.
- 33 "Och allt ska bli gott och allt ska vändas i gott, när tinget och ägaren är ett." *Ibid.*, 101.
- 34 "HEJ du där." *Ibid.*, 67.
- 35 "Jag är din egen personliga tillfällighetsdikt. Hur länge bestämmer du själv. Det är du som betalar, om inte annat så i tid." *Ibid.*, 67.

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- 36 "Nu är jag redan sex rader inne i dig. Vill du ha mig längre in? Tyvärr hör jag inte vad du säger; jag hör bara mitt eko i dig. Men låt oss fortsätta. Jag tror du vill." Ibid., 67.
- 37 "Alla relationer i ett senkapitalistisk samhälle förvandlas till, / ja, vad förvandlas de till, det är svårt att minnas: / på skrivbordet en ljussläckare, en papperskniv, en hålstans. / Vi äter dem som rättvisemärkta frukter." Ibid., 130.
- 38 Malmio, "Wunderkammer?," 416.
- 39 Konings, *Emotional Logic*, 3.
- 40 Andtbacka, *Wunderkammer*, 131.
- 41 Ibid., 5.
- 42 Ibid., 7.
- 43 See Konings, *Emotional Logic*, 10.
- 44 "OCKSÅ jag brukar få den där frågan / om vad det är som driver mitt skrivande. / Låt mig förklara." Andtbacka, *Wunderkammer*, 50.
- 45 Ibid., 50.
- 46 "Ungefär så föreställer jag mig det hela." Ibid., 51.
- 47 Mason, *Postcapitalism*, 117-118.
- 48 Ibid., 119.
- 49 Ibid., 241-242.
- 50 Ibid., 115.
- 51 Ibid., 111.
- 52 Andtbacka, *Wunderkammer*, 12-13.
- 53 Ibid., 64.
- 54 "Tradescants," Garden Museum, accessed March 6, 2020, <https://gardenmuseum.org.uk/the-museum/history/tradescants>. John Ewan, "John Tradescant," Encyclopedia. People. Science and Technology. Zoology: Biographies, accessed March 6, 2020, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/science-and-technology/zoology-biographies/john-tradescant>.
- 55 Andtbacka, *Wunderkammer*, 144.
- 56 Mason, *Postcapitalism*, 112.
- 57 Ibid., 120.
- 58 "Att samla är att ting för ting närma sig det man inte är." Andtbacka, *Wunderkammer*, 144.