

Texture of Knowledge

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Susan Gold/Smith is a Professor of Visual Arts at the University of Windsor, School of Visual Arts in Windsor, Ontario. Currently, her exhibition, "Trophy Room" is traveling to venues across Canada, public galleries in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario from 2004 through 2006.

Gold/Smith, Susan. (2004). *Texture of Knowledge*. *Knowledge Organization*, 31(2). 74-91.



"Abracadabra", University of Uppsala technician placing the herbarium botanical information into a computer format, artist's collection, 1996.

As a visual artist I am interested in the related practices of art and science – the ways we understand the natural world, what we identify as knowledge, and how we collect, organize, store, and represent information. It was with this sense of inquiry that I traveled to Uppsala, Sweden, to explore this centre of eighteenth-century scientific thinking and the legacy of western scientific classification systems.

Botanist, Carolus Linnaeus, born in Sweden in 1707, developed our binomial system of classification. He classified plants, minerals, animals, and some diseases on the basis of likeness and difference. The residue of his life's work can still be found in the University of Uppsala herbarium and animal collections, in the city gardens, and in the preserved residences.¹

I was searching for a transparent view into the early development of science, a view into the transitional period when knowledge became quantifi-

able and alienated from artistic practice. Linnaeus' legacy was rich with revealing residue. Displayed were examples of his botanical collages, metaphoric language in his writing, and drawings in his notebooks. His scientific practice took place in a domestic environment much like an artist's studio. His private rooms were literally wall-papered with botanical prints. In his lived world, science and art were not separated as they are today.

Naming and classifying was the foundation of Linnaeus' work. In his historic text, "Systemae Naturae"², Linnaeus partitioned knowledge. The final category, "Litteraria"³, became a vulnerable addendum holding the sediment of unquantifiable language, resemblances, virtues, stories, living histories. Linnaeus' task – nothing less than the "nomination of the visible"⁴ – was to reduce the distance between things and language. In his philosophical treatise on botany, Linnaeus discussed the limiting and filtering of visible things in order to transcribe them into language. His goal was to create "botanical calligrams"⁵: "Displayed in themselves, emptied of all resemblances, cleansed even of their colours, visual representation will now at last provide natural history with what constitutes a proper object."⁶

My exhibition, "Texture of Knowledge", ("Der Stuff Des Wissens", B.I.S., Möchengladbach, Germany, 1997), contains images from collections photographed in Uppsala, images from other scientific sources, and from the fluxus of my studio practice.

Working with the images in my studio, I was also limiting and filtering and placing forms side

by side. The resulting images disturb the notion of “a proper object”, and evoke a complex web of associations – perhaps, the lost “Litteraria”. In the studio I was playing with the rhetoric of natural history display, breaking through the rectilinear framing, and introducing an incoherence into systematic logic.⁷

Notes

- 1 Gold/Smith, S., The Sights of Early Science. A Visual Artist’s Response to the Uppsala Natural History Collections, Scandinavian-Canadian Studies, Vol.14, 2002-23, p.130-142.
- 2 Linnaeus, Carolus, *Systema Naturae* (1735), Facsimile of the First Edition, Dutch Classics on the History of Science, vol.8 (Holland: Nieuwkoop b. De Graaf, 1964), (Methodus Section), unnumbered.
- 3 Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things: An archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p.130.
- 4 Foucault, p.132.
- 5 Foucault, p. 135.
- 6 Foucault, p 134.
- 7 Pakasaar, Helga, Trophy Room (catalogue essay), Thames Gallery, Chatham Cultural Centre, Chatham, Ontario, 2003, unnumbered.

Plate 1.

“Sections”; a galamanka specimen, a fish indigenous to Lake Baikal, found its way from a Lake Baikal biological station to a transparent photocopy in one of my specimen vials, surrounded by fragments of photocopied correspondence containing Inuktituk characters; “A Natural History: Sections”, Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor Ontario, 1993.



Plate 2 (details)

“Specimens”; hundreds of plastic vials were filled with transparent photocopies of the texts and images I had worked with in my studio for several years; “A Natural History: Specimens”, Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor Ontario, 1993.



Plate 3 (details)

“Specimens”; hundreds of plastic vials were filled with transparent photocopies of the texts and images I had worked with in my studio for several years; “A Natural History: Specimens”, Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor Ontario, 1993.



Plate 4 (detail)

“BioLogia”; a botanical specimen from the Uppsala collection floats in a scientific glass bottle, one of hundreds of these produced for several installation works; “Southwest Biennial”, Art Gallery of Windsor, 1995.



Plate 5

“Texture of Knowledge”; herbarium files from the historic University of Uppsala herbarium are confronted by a display case of examples from the “Order: Artiodactyla, Family: Cervidae”; “Der Stuff Des Wissens”, B.I.S., Möchengladbach, Germany, 1997.



Plate 6

“Texture of Knowledge”, a rabbit specimen photographed in a natural history collection in Finland confronts an herbarium collection in book form compiled by Bursar, the collection used as reference by Linnaeus, himself, in Uppsala in the mid 1700s; “Der Stuff Des Wissens”, B.I.S., Möchengladbach, Germany, 1997.

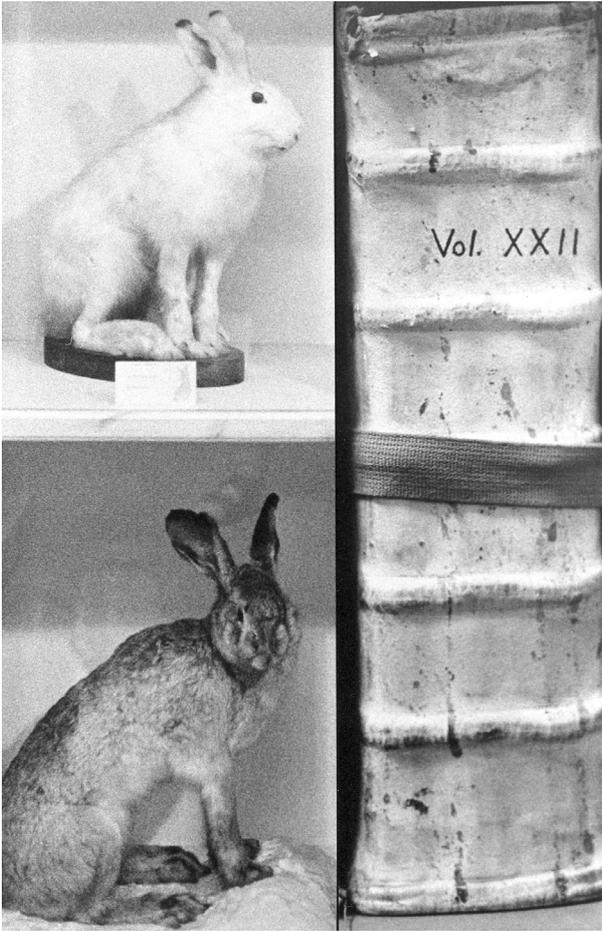


Plate 7

“The Files”, words and phrases taken from Umberto Eco’s, “The Name of the Rose”, typed on file cards; here the cards are splayed on the photocopy plate and copied on transparent acetate, “The Sights of Science”, Artscene: Artcite/Offsite, Windsor Ontario 2003.

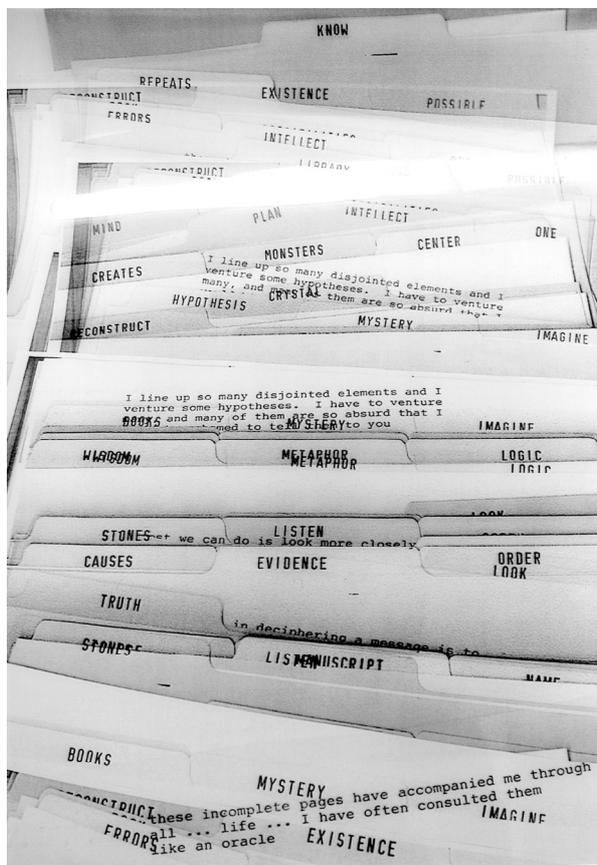


Plate 8

“Studio Encounter”, Linnaeus’s botanical wallpaper re-produced by IKEA, text by Foucault, a hunting trophy and its painted representation meet are photocopied on translucent vellum; “The Trophy Room”, Thames Gallery, Chatham Ontario, 2002.

