

OBSERVATIONES
IN

For Hope

Susan Gold Smith

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Susan Gold Smith is Professor Emerita of visual arts at the University of Windsor, School of Visual Arts in Windsor, Ontario. Currently, she is working out of a community engaged studio, *one ten park: a working space* in Windsor, continuing her explorations into scientific and domestic display of nature. Recently, “Decorating the End of the World” and “OBSERVATIONES IN” were exhibited on Western University's campus in the McIntosh Gallery and Weldon Library.

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Classification is a defining force. It groups that which is defined as being alike and separates that which is perceived to be different. In doing so it creates boundaries. The categories thus established build fences around concepts, homogenizing what is inside. Classification is also ubiquitous—Olson and Gold Smith (2006)

OBSERVATIONES IN (Gold 2013) was a site specific, mixed-media art installation displayed in three library display cases in the Weldon Library on the campus of Western University's London, Ontario campus in May and June of 2013. As the exhibiting artist at the McIntosh Gallery on campus, I was invited to intervene onto the larger campus with artwork. The impressive Weldon Library site was chosen with its traditional flat display cases. The implications of the site correlated with the material I would be assembling. The flat display cases opened like a book to the library itself. Both the library and my assembled objects were significant with respect to the history of systematic classification.

The natural objects used in the display cases, horned larks, insects, and eggs, were loaned by the Biology collection of Western University; the stones, ceramic forms, and plastic petri dishes were from the artists' collection. The manipulated text used in the display cases was created from a facsimile of the first edition of *Systema Naturae* (Linnaeus 1735).

The installation of particular objects was organized on site to create a state of confoundedness in the viewer, to break through quotidian ways of seeing and to open a space for insight. The objects were meant to speak to each other—and to their context—to confound each other as well as the viewer with their juxtaposition. The

objects were, of course, mute, as was their relationship to the viewer, but their seeming illogic or strangeness breaks down boundaries of linear thinking.

The pages of purposely stretched text in each library case were pages from a facsimile of Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus' text pulled across the copier plate during the xerographic process. The practice was used to jar loose the content of the material, to set it free, and then to be able to see text in a different way. The performative action harnessed the operations of chance, which can be productive for the creative process (Lewis 2007). Words were stretched to illegibility, but the processes exposed embedded alternative meanings. Certain words came forward; the physical makeup of text was exposed. When pulling back and forth across a digital copier plate, text was strangely mirrored onto itself or condensed into unfamiliar icons.

Plastic petri dishes were positioned on the pages and contained transformed text photocopied on transparent acetate, reminding the viewer of the laboratory process and the scientific eye. Text became an object for observation.

The historic documents used were from an era that formed a transition in world view—from a time when all beings formed Nature, including their stories and their coincidences, to a time when only what can be measured and systematized was real.

The preserved bird bodies were from an extensive collection of horned larks housed in the Biology Department collection. Bird bodies could be seen anthropomorphically as individualized readings of the moment of death, or they could appear as a scientific collection of similar objects, labeled and named and revealing their differences.

Small insects from the Biology collection were pinned to the pages as well. They represent complex life forms, now reduced to black marks.

Natural stones and the simple ceramic objects were meant to confound the viewer as was the morphed text. The stones from Sanikiluaq on the Belcher Islands of Hudson's Bay were intriguing because they all bore mysterious circular configurations. Nature appeared to be speaking through naturally created iconography.

The objects in the cases were static representations of living processes posited in the dynamic environment of an active University Library. The Library is a site of systematic classification utilized by people, opening books, reading, researching, and utilizing material for understanding. The University, like a book, is constructed to open and to use to understand the world.

The out-of-context placement of mummified birds, stones, illegible text and pinned insects where normally one would find books, compels the viewer to question this dislocation. The choices of specific text, stones, and animal objects, were meant to optimize the experience of understanding the seemingly disparate objects. The installation broke things apart and the mind's desire was to

then put them together. Re-formed connections come out of the contested space.

The questions that came from OBSERVATIONES IN can break through our learned ideas of classification and offer up a space where thought can move more freely. Boundaries were broken and opened and a poetic space was created where questions, reflections, inspirations, humour, magic, memory, and loss come into play. Questions arise: How does systematic classification affect our understanding of natural objects? Our understanding of Nature? Our understanding of Language and of Art?

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Figure 1. Overview, Weldon Library Installation. Photo credit: McIntosh Gallery.



Figure 2. Detail, library case installation: distorted photocopies of Linnaeus texts from Systema Naturae, plastic petri dishes containing transparent photocopies of text, preserved horned lark natural objects from Western University Biology Collection. Photo credit: Susan Gold Smith.

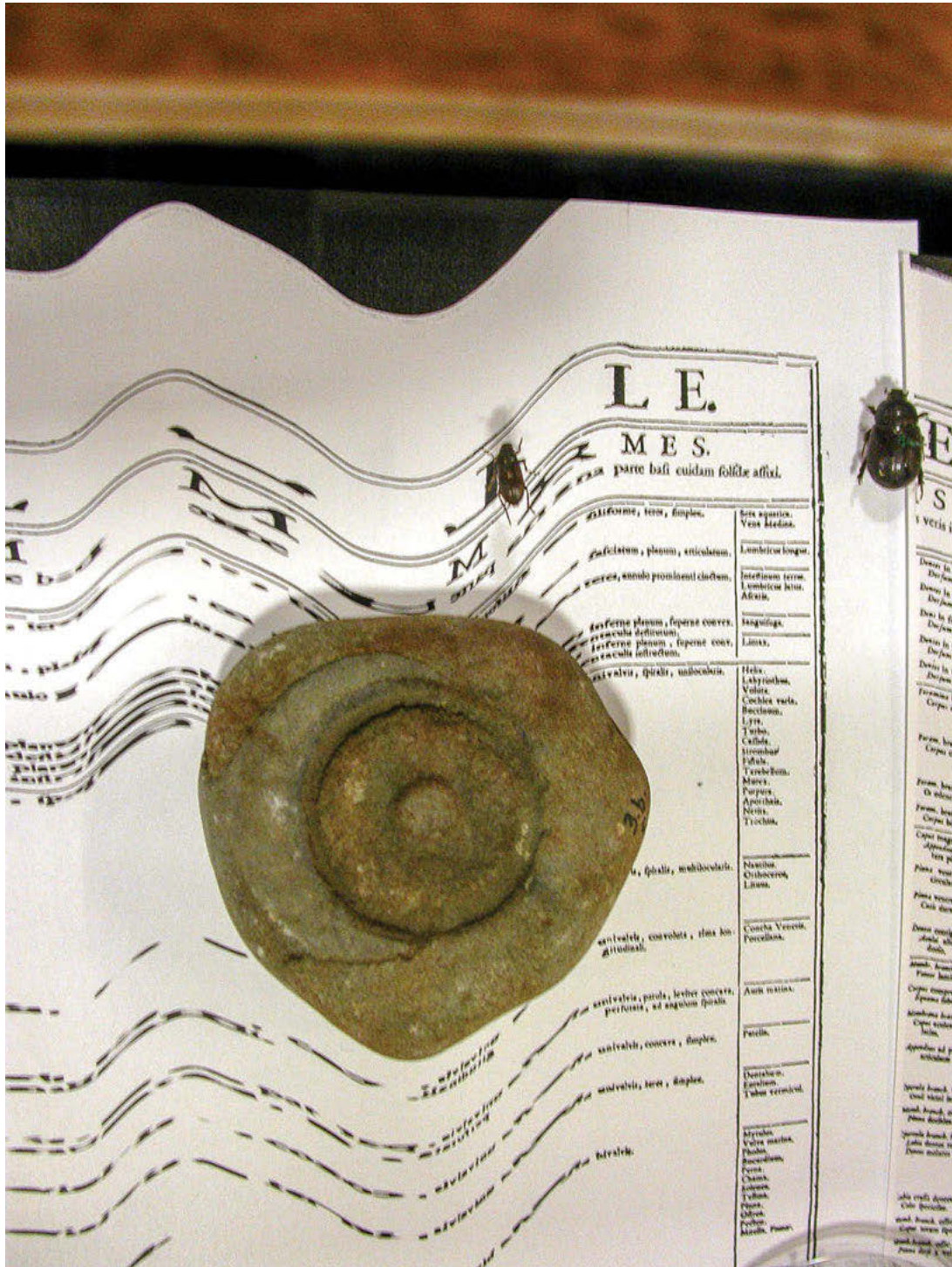


Figure 3. Detail, library case installation: distorted photocopies of Linnaeus texts from Systema Naturae, stone from Belcher Islands, preserved insects from Western University Biology Collection. Photo credit: Susan Gold Smith.

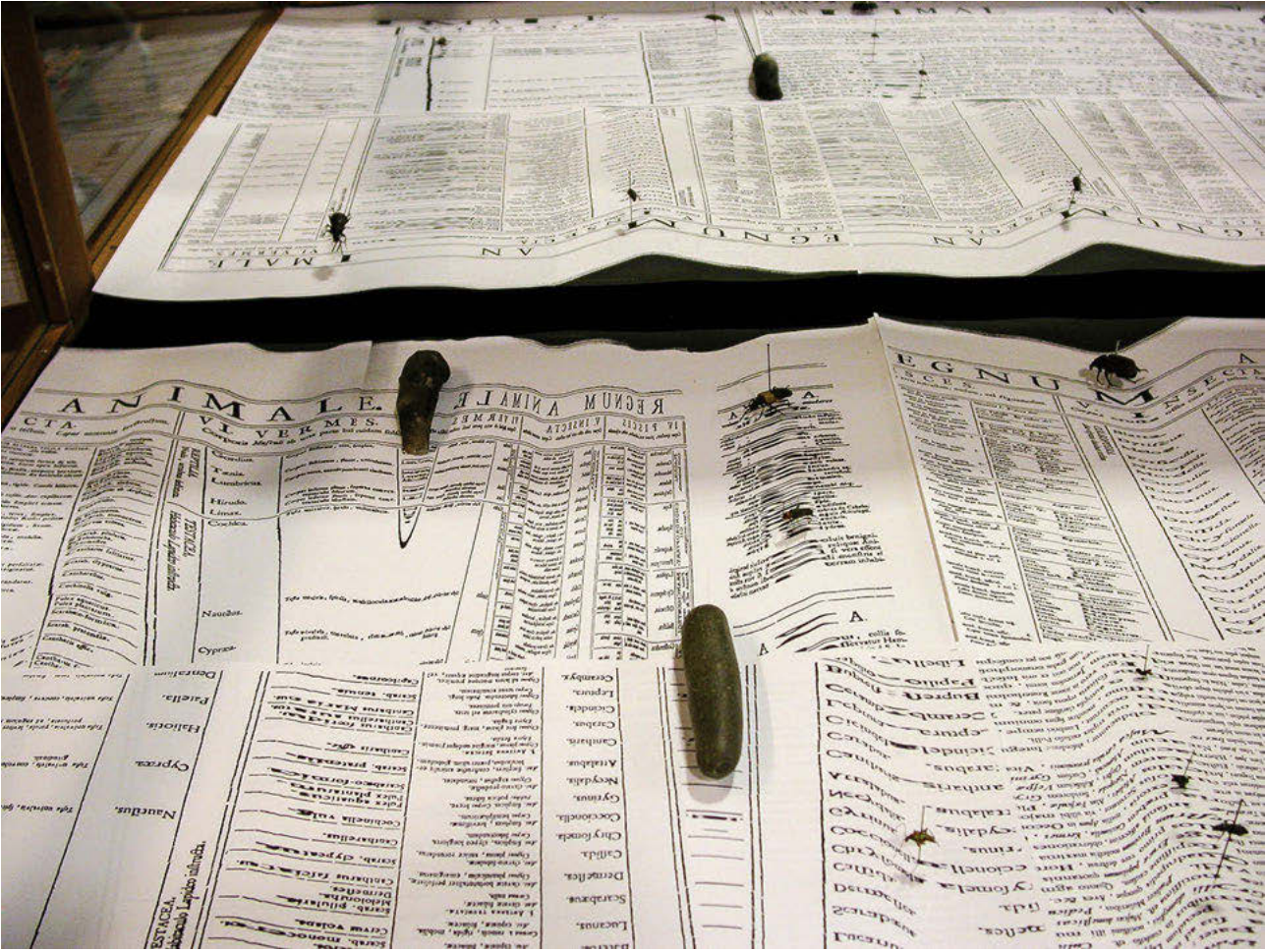


Figure 4. Detail, library case installation: distorted photocopies of Linnaeus texts from Systema Naturae, stone from Denmark, raku fired ceramic objects, preserved insect specimens from Western University Biology Collection. Photo credit: Susan Gold Smith.

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- (3) tracing the history of classification knowledge and methodology
- (4) discussing questions of education and training in classification
- (5) concerning themselves with the problems of terminology in general and with respect to special fields.

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