

Ordnungswut

Marlene Bart

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Text: Marlies Wirth

R) Utopias

All utopias are depressing because they leave no room for chance, for difference, for "otherness". All is ordered, and order prevails.

Each utopia is always based on a great taxonomic intention: a place for each thing and each thing in its place.¹

The human quest for order symbolizes both the vital need for clarity and the impossibility of achieving it completely. Organizing the beings and things according to their characteristics, similarities, time and significance gives the illusion of orientation in a world whose inherent diversity seems almost infinite.

In her solo exhibition entitled *Ordnungswut*, Berlin-based artist Marlene Bart presents a multimedia installation that explores the complex relationship between art and science. Based on the authority of hierarchical systems of order in natural history, her work questions the structures of knowledge culture, which are deeply rooted in European colonialism and the increasingly crumbling paradigms of the Anthropocene.

¹ Georges Perec: „Denken/Ordnen“ (1997), p. 145

Babel

In the biblical tale of the Tower of Babel - immortalized in Vienna by Pieter Bruegel the Elder - humanity strives to build a tower that will reach the heavens. As a symbol of human hubris to attain the ultimate knowledge, the tower remains unfinished through the confusion of language caused by God, scattering humanity across the world and thwarting its unity.

The 1941 story "The Library of Babel" by Argentinian writer and librarian Jorge Luis Borges is a philosophical and metaphysical speculation that describes the concept of a fictional infinite library containing all possible books. Each book is unique, but the sheer quantity of books encompasses every conceivable combination of letters. Randomly arranged in the library, the majority of the books contain incomprehensible texts. Borges' Library of Babel is a metaphor for the futility of human attempts to attain absolute knowledge or to find order in an infinitely complex system.

The exhibition opens with the construction of spatial modules that can be read as a symbol of hierarchical knowledge architectures and the subsequent collapse of the utopia of "order". The stack of museum showcases is constructed around a core of light tubes.

Sculptural elements, glass objects and 3D-printed specimens from natural history are trapped in each display case, removed from their biological context and displayed as collected objects in an apparently non-systematic order.

The physical, tower-like installation forms the starting point for a counter-narrative to the "obsession with order", which is ultimately resolved in a multimedia virtual reality installation.

Encyclopedia

Encyclopedias serve as a cultural memory of sorts, preserving collective experiences and intellectual achievements while enabling them to be passed on. They play a role in standardizing

terminology and meaning and help to develop a common language by providing clear definitions and explanations. Encyclopaedias are not only passive sources, but also actors in the production of knowledge. By updating and expanding, they contribute to the development and change of knowledge and promote awareness of diversity and cultural differences.

Early encyclopaedias were called "theatrum", thus expressing their quality as a dynamic arena of knowledge - think of the anatomical "theaters" with public sections in the 18th and 19th centuries. The encyclopaedia emphasizes the immersive nature of the book into whose world readers can lose themselves and the performative character of the "theatrum", which - similar to cabinets of art and curiosities - enables an imaginary "journey" through objects and information.

The virtual reality installation entitled "Theatrum Radix" (a collaboration with the Berlin studio Ikonospace and the composer Daniel Benyamin) takes viewers on a visual journey through seven chapters: Perception, Dissection, Metamorphosis, Construction, Battle, Dissolution and Reconstruction. The objects from the showcases function as "portals" from real space into virtual space, where they reappear as digital twins and serve as the starting point for the virtual narratives. At each stage, new transformations are revealed, suggesting possibilities for replacing linear thinking with multidimensional thinking.

In her dissertation and publication "Das Künstlerbuch als multimediale Enzyklopädie", Marlene Bart lays the theoretical foundation for the critical ideas explored in her artistic work.

Foucault

In his work "The Order of Things" ("Les mots et les choses"), Michel Foucault introduced a radical perspective on the history of thought and science. Foucault argues that thought and the

sciences are shaped by certain epistemes that determine how knowledge is organized and understood.

He examines how language and classification systems influence the perception of reality and emphasizes that language not only represents the world, but also actively participates in its construction. Instead of telling the history of ideas, Foucault proposes an "archaeology of knowledge" in which he examines the structures and rules that have shaped knowledge at different times.

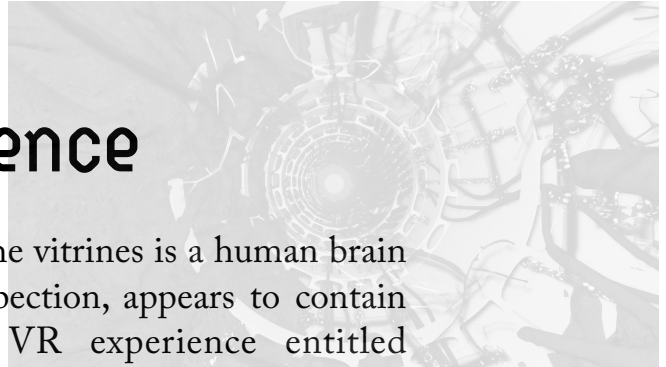
Non-Human Intelligence

The first object displayed in one of the vitrines is a human brain made of glass, which, on closer inspection, appears to contain bees. The first chapter of the VR experience entitled "Perception" - inspired by historical NASA educational films - leads into a surreal neuronal structure that is surrounded by distorted reflections and has parallels with representations of galaxies.

The dissection of a frog, which is particularly common in high schools in the USA, introduces the chapter "Dissection" and refers to the human urge to open and dissect things in order to understand them.

In this way, "Theatrum Radix" also questions the "uniqueness" of human intelligence: the emergence of microorganisms and bees points to the diverse forms of other, non-human intelligence in nature and the impossibility of definitively describing the complex relationships between perception and intelligence.

The chapter "Construction" presents the spider as the architect of the Theatrum Radix, who constantly constructs new complex forms from thousands of particles. Bart references the mythological story of Arachne, a talented weaver in Greek mythology, which reflects the tension between creative autonomy and the pitfalls of knowledge. Arachne challenged the goddess Athena to a weaving competition and created an impressive work depicting the missteps of the gods. Athena,



outraged by Arachne's artistic skills and her critical portrayal, transformed her into a spider.

Athena, who protects the established order, symbolizes institutional control over knowledge, while Arachne, who boldly challenges convention and creates alternative narratives, reminds us that knowledge is not only a matter of representation, but also a symbol of power and control over that knowledge. The story thus symbolically emphasizes the challenges that come with breaking established norms and hierarchies and highlights the role of art as a transformative force for society and knowledge culture.

Re-Ordering

Another chapter of the VR experience, entitled "Battle", explores the utopia of a balance in the hierarchical order of knowledge culture. In a room of hexagonal structures - honeycombs? - a dung beetle tries to transport soap bubbles to the other end of a giant scale, where a stag beetle bursts the ephemeral bubbles with its distinctive mandibles.

The problematic nature of hierarchical ordering systems in the transmission of knowledge becomes clear when one considers their close connection with colonialist thinking. Historically, certain forms of knowledge were considered superior and placed in hierarchical structures, creating power imbalances and marginalization. This led to the suppression of non-Western or indigenous knowledge, which is part of the colonialist legacy.

Borges devotes a short text to a certain "Chinese encyclopedia" in which "the animals are grouped as follows: "A) belonging to the Emperor, B) embalmed, C) tamed, D) sucking pigs, E sirens, F) fabled, G) dogs on the loose, H) included in the current classification, I acting as if they were mad, J) countless, K) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, L) et cetera, M) who have just broken the jug, N) who from a distance resemble flies".²

² Sebastian Hackenschmidt in: Nicole Six & Paul Petritsch, Katalog Nr. / Catalog no. 1 – 10482, 2012, quoted from: Jorge Luis Borges (1952), Cf. Michel Foucault: Die Ordnung der Dinge, (Frankfurt am Main, 1974), p. 17.

The familiar order is becoming disrupted and the reorganization based on alternative categories allows us to overcome the historically determined power structures and create a fairer, pluralistic knowledge landscape. While printed encyclopaedias have evolved into online databases, digital platforms such as Wikipedia are being shaped as a decentralized and collaborative knowledge network through the diverse contributions of internet users worldwide. This democratization of information challenges the conventional authority associated with encyclopedias and promotes a dynamic, collective approach to knowledge generation.

Pattern Recognition

In a print created especially for the exhibition, Bart examines the formal structures on which the tower construction is based. The enlarged close-up of crystal glass is applied to various support media. The surfaces - mirror glass, acrylic glass and plastics - lead to a distortion and alteration of the depicted patterns, which, when reduced to visual symbols in their overlapping, result in completely new structures.

Taxonomies and hierarchies are also essential for structuring information in the field of AI learning databases and enable machine learning algorithms to recognize patterns, relationships and classifications. However, the relevance of taxonomies and hierarchies in both cultural classification systems and AI databases raises critical questions about bias. The inherent biases present in historical classifications or human-created taxonomies may unintentionally persist in AI systems, highlighting the importance of careful consideration and ethical handling of the data.

A balance between the structured order that these systems provide and the need for flexibility and inclusivity is critical to the promotion of responsible knowledge management and AI learning.

As such, Bart's work also includes an important critical commentary on the evolving synergy between human-designed

organizational systems and the possibilities of self-learning technologies in shaping our understanding of the world.

Imagination Age

The most successful groups in human history had one thing in common: they had the best communication system compared to their competitors. The fittest communicators - whether tribe, city-state, kingdom, corporation or nation - had (1) a larger percentage of people with (2) access to (3) higher quality information, (4) a greater ability to turn that information into knowledge and action, (5) and more freedom to pass that new knowledge on to the other members of their group.³

The Imagination Age, as a philosophical principle, stands for a new wave of cultural and economic innovation that leaves behind the analytical focus of the previous Information Age and focuses instead on creativity and imagination. A key concept is that technologies such as immersive virtual reality and user-generated content will reshape human interactions as well as economic and social structures, increasing the value of the "imagination work" done by designers, artists and creative actors over rational thinking as the basis of culture and economy⁴. This paradigm emphasizes the central role of imagination and communication in fostering a dynamic and transformative global culture.

Tentacular Thinking

Today's solutions require a critical reflection on existing hierarchies and the integration of diverse perspectives in the exchange of knowledge. A decolonial approach emphasizes the importance of respecting and valuing non-Western epistemologies and local knowledge systems. This means

³ Rita J. King: The Emergence of a New Global Culture in the Imagination Age (2007). Published in British Council Essays. <http://archive.is/20120722122948/www.britishcouncil.org/tn2020-research-findings-authors-king.htm>

⁴ after Charlie Magree: The Age of Imagination: Coming Soon to a Civilization Near You (1993), see: <https://www.signaldesign.net/Age%20of%20Imagination.pdf>

breaking down hierarchical systems of order, promoting diverse voices and integrating alternative forms of knowledge.

In her work, Marlene Bart refers to the concept of "Tentacular Thinking", which was coined by the feminist scholar Donna Haraway in her work "Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene" (2016). Haraway uses this term metaphorically to describe a way of thinking that turns away from linear, hierarchical thinking and instead advocates a multidimensional, networked and tentacular approach to complex problems.

"Tentacular Thinking" encourages making connections, understanding relationships and relating to non-human actors, whether in the environment or in technological systems.

Using art as a medium of exploration, Bart challenges traditional Western imperialist thinking and invites consideration of potential new frontiers beyond conventional scientific categories in the context of the limits of visual and spatial perception. *Ordnungswut* invites the audience to reflect on the emergence of repressed and alternative forms of knowledge and non-human intelligence. Her work takes an experimental step towards the actualization of human knowledge culture and reflects on artistic strategies and speculative order as essential paradigms of the decentralization of knowledge production and distribution.

As such Marlene Bart's Ordnungswut emphasizes the need to move away from rigid hierarchical categories and develop an understanding of the interconnections and relationships between different actors in order to better deal with the challenges of an increasingly complex and interconnected world in a more sustainable and equitable way.