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Press Release

Realms of Knowledge
19 May–8 August 2021

"As knowledge grows so, too, does doubt." In times of crisis Goethe's maxim seems all the more pertinent. While our faith in absolute certainties crumbles and irrational explanations gain momentum, it seems that Enlightenment ideals have reached their limits. Whether knowledge is set in stone or not has long been a topic of debate. Moreover for decades now the focus has been on the spatial organization of knowledge. The exhibition at the Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich taps into these discussions. It is an invitation to engage with the spatial structures of knowledge and shows how differently contemporary artists – including Fiona Tan, Candida Höfer, and Luc Tuymans – deal with them.

Where is knowledge generated, organised, stored, and mediated? How is structured order expressed in architecture and interior design? And *vice versa*: to what extent do architectural circumstances define the knowledge that a society believes it has of itself and the world? Since the late 1980s questions regarding the role of "realms of knowledge" have increasingly become the focus of theoretical discourse, which has in turn heightened our awareness of the fact that the selection, organization, and presentation of any content always influence its interpretation. Artists, too, look at realms of knowledge and bring to light power structures hidden within them. Thus encyclopaedias, archives, and universities come under scrutiny and questions are asked of their role in the emergence of knowledge systems.

In the exhibition *Realms of Knowledge* the Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich presents artistic approaches to notions of knowledge and to systems used to order it. The relationship between physical and virtual collections is explored as are the connections between analogue and digital records. In *Shadow Archive* (2019) artist **Fiona Tan** (*1966) engages with Paul Otlet's Mundaneum. Dating to around 1900 the aim of Otlet's project was no less than to gather together all the world's knowledge in one place and to make it accessible to everyone. In Tan's images the utopian undertaking—now also known as the 'paper Google'—turns into a dystopian scenario. In *The Temple* (1996) Belgian artist **Luc Tuymans** (*1958) also raises questions concerning the presentation and

accessibility of knowledge banks. To this end he turnes his attention to the largest genealogical archive in the world, which contains billions of records. Created and run by the Mormon Church it is located deep inside a granite mountain. Tuymans' prints afford us rare insights into these premises, although he also deploys obfuscation and alienation tactics that all but obliterate any pictorial information. The tangled connections between curiosity and a thirst for knowledge on one hand and subliminal fantasies of omnipotence on the other forms the basis of Jorge Luis Borges' *Library of Babel*, and **Érik Desmazières'** (*1948) has realized eerily beautiful etchings of this "infinite" fictive library. By contrast German photographer **Candida Höfer** (*1944) views institutions such as universities, libraries, and zoos with a sober, distanced gaze. And when she shows us interiors at ETH Zürich, for instance, she encourages us to take a closer look at our own immediate surroundings.

It seems that the common thread running through the works in this exhibition is the "encyclopaedability" of knowledge, which—as the exhibits show—will always prove to be a fallacy. There is no way of fulfilling the desire for a body of knowledge that is stable, that encompasses everything, and that can be represented systematically and with consistent uniformity. A universal overview is as illusory as the idea that the complexity of the world could be contained and hence rendered controllable. There will always be areas of uncertainty, and the exhibition also addresses these areas—in the knowledge that our cognitive horizons are limited and that there are things that can never fully be grasped.

Useful Information

Curator	Laura Vuille, Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich
Events	Details of the event programme can be found at https://gs.ethz.ch/en/agenda/
Opening times	Daily, 10:00–16:45 Closed: Saturday 22 May – Monday 24 May (Whitsun) Sunday 1 August 2021 (National Day)
Admission	Free
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