

# **The Dynamic Library**

Organizing Knowledge at the Sitterwerk—  
Precedents and Possibilities

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*The Dynamic Library: Organizing Knowledge at the Sitterwerk—Precedents and Possibilities* presents essays in translation from the 2011 German-language publication, *Archive der Zukunft: Neue Wissensordnungen im Sitterwerk*.

Originally published by the Sitterwerk in St.Gallen, Switzerland, *Archive der Zukunft* documented a symposium of the same name held at the Sitterwerk in November 2011.

# Introduction

## Background

The symposium *Archives of the Future: New Orders of Knowledge at the Sitterwerk* held November 4–5, 2011, was the result of discussions about opening the art library to a broader public. Ongoing conversations with artists suggested that new breakthroughs could be made in terms of how books were arranged on the shelves, thanks to the use of RFID (Radio Frequency Identification). Close contact with the material archive and art-production practices triggered the desire to create a more flexible interface between books and materials via digital networking.

A glimpse back into the Sitterwerk's history and surroundings fosters a deeper understanding of the background and development of this particular project. Felix Lehner established an art foundry in Beinwil am See in 1983, starting out with only two employees. In 1994, the company moved into the larger buildings of the former Sittertal textile dyeworks, on the outskirts of St.Gallen, and today it works with approximately forty employees. The foundry's openness to new ideas and technologies has helped it steadily grow, and it is now a recognized center specializing in the production, as well as restoration, of three-dimensional art works.

Parallel to its commercial work, the foundry has also launched several noncommercial cultural initiatives, which were united under one roof in August 2006 as the Sitterwerk Foundation. Its four divisions are: the *Kunstbibliothek* (art library), *Werkstoffarchiv* (material archive), *Kesselhaus Josephsohn* (Josephsohn boiler-house exhibition space), and *Atelierhaus* (studio house). The close relationship between the foundation and foundry positions Sitterwerk as a major center for art and production, a unique facility capable of combining traditional craftsmanship with cutting-edge technologies in theory and practice.

Upon the establishment of the Sitterwerk Foundation, the art library became a publicly accessible reference library. In 2007, it joined the St.Gallen library network (SGBN), whose database is connected to Sitterwerk's catalog, making its inventory of books and materials searchable as well. The majority of its approximately 25,000 volumes on art, architecture, design, and photography were part of a bequest from avid collector and connoisseur Daniel Rohner (1948–2007), who had brought them together as his personal

library. Felix Lehner also contributed a large number of specialized books on casting technology, bronzes, restoration, and conservation from his own collection.

Right from the start, the Sitterwerk team and Daniel Rohner hotly debated how the books should be arranged. The interiors of the former textile dyeworks had been renovated, and for the first time Rohner's entire book collection could be brought together in one spot—previously, the volumes had been boxed up and stored in the attics and basements of various friends and acquaintances. The fundamental question of how to systematically organize such vast holdings was just one aspect of transforming Rohner's private book collection into a publicly accessible library. Private collections are always influenced by their creators, whose tastes and personal stories are intimately connected with the books. In Rohner's case, this involved close connections with art and artists, curators and gallery owners, booksellers and antiquarian dealers. His own highly subjective history of art determined the books' initial arrangement. He presented and explored these personal associations by setting up several groupings of books on the various tables of the art library, which in turn sparked stimulating discussions between collectors, foundry staff, and visitors.

### **RFID in the Art Library**

As the Sitterwerk staff's own experiences and Rohner's unique vision came together, it soon became clear that the character of his private library should ideally be retained, and therefore an open, dynamic organizational system would be the best solution. The subjective knowledge of both the collector and the art library's users would be taken into consideration, and the thematic compilations created as researchers consulted the holdings would be recorded both digitally and physically, in the database, as well as on the shelves and tables. This dynamic approach allows for serendipitous discoveries, so researchers can find relevant material even in places where they didn't know to look for it. This lets readers gain knowledge for their own research, and also opens up new and surprising perspectives. All this led to the implementation of a novel solution using RFID technology, a dedicated database, and a custom-developed device to easily record each book's location. Out of respect for the book as an (ideally well-designed) object, the traditional exterior spine label was dispensed with, in favor of an RFID tag attached to the book's interior. This keeps the book's haptic nature intact, complete with all traces of light wear and tear over time.

As the RFID device makes its daily rounds of the bookshelves, its antenna reads each book's tag, so the book's current location is transmitted to the digital catalog. Inventory is taken at such brief intervals that this could be considered a permanent inventory of sorts, updated daily, allowing the

books to exist in a highly dynamic, flexible order. In this sense the art library adapts to its users, who can make their own subject-specific or associative arrangements on the shelves. Another goal was to connect the two collections of the art library and material archive. The idea of using tables as Rohner did, to display groupings of books, seemed ideal. It was further developed so that each table was equipped with RFID antennas, and then the database was expanded to include a list of the books laid out on a table, so materials could be saved in thematic groups, and researchers could annotate the records with additional comments. With the user's consent, these data sets can be made available to the general public, so Sitterwerk has successfully created a platform for knowledge sharing and enhancement.

### **The Symposium**

Although this pilot project had been decided upon, the ongoing discussion of libraries' classification and organization systems was still far from over. Librarians' attention to the matter was heightened, and speaking with researching artists and other art library users allowed them to gain insight into new options made possible by digital media and the Internet. In light of their experiences with this pilot project, and together with Zurich-based creatives Anthon Astrom, Fabian Wegmüller, and Lukas Zimmer—who at the time of the symposium were working collectively as the Café Society—library staff came up with the idea of organizing an interdisciplinary symposium on orders of classification and knowledge systems.

Further discussion led to the identification of three key focus areas—classification systems, art, and new orders of knowledge—each with three contributions. Gerhard Matter, chief librarian of Basel's cantonal library network, introduced and moderated the first portion. Susanne Bieri, a long-standing trustee and member of the Sitterwerk library's advisory board, as well as head of the graphic collections of the Swiss National Library in Bern, dealt with the field of art. The second day of the symposium explored how the dynamic order in the art library and the material archive can be a starting point for thinking about new opportunities in digital and analog applications, and what effect these might have on the future of information organization in archives.

### **Classification Systems**

Paul Michel, emeritus professor of German literature at the University of Zurich and a renowned specialist in the history of encyclopedic knowledge, opens the first section with "Organizing Knowledge," wherein he lays out the fundamentals of historical knowledge-classification systems, while highlighting their relativity. It is enlightening, especially with regard to the supposed authority of these hierarchical systems, to recall one of Diderot's key

assertions, made in his 1755 *Encyclopédie*: there are as many systems for classifying human knowledge as there are individual points of view.

Tobias Schelling, a librarian who served as a project manager at the Zentral- und Hochschulbibliothek Luzern (Central and University Library of Lucerne) in 2011, provides an overview of his experience with organizational systems in libraries and how they've changed through the centuries. He begins with a concrete example—the renovation and transfer of certain portions of the library where he works—and outlines three different organizational systems, each typical of the period in which they arose. He then offers a critical discussion of open-access systems in academic libraries: what are the benefits of open access, what are its limits, and what might the alternatives be?

Philipp Messner, cultural scholar and archivist, recalls a pioneer of applied information science in his contribution, "New Orders of Knowledge around 1900." Karl Wilhelm Bührer (1861–1917), curator of the Mittelschweizerischen Geographisch-Commerciellen Gesellschaft ("Central Swiss Geo-Commercial Society") and library assistant, considered the bound book an outdated form, because information in the form of thoughts is freely movable, easily combined, and rearranged—hence he felt card catalogs were the ideal system. This flexible, free-form approach was the only one that would make an associatively structured, individually oriented knowledge system possible. Today, thanks to comprehensive digitization, Bührer's ideas can readily be put into practice.

## **Art**

Since the end of the twentieth century, collecting, recording, storing, and archiving have become increasingly important artistic strategies. Artists often see themselves as forensic researchers and material collectors. Looking into the past with the goal of classifying, organizing, and analyzing has become a formative element of our individual and collective memory. As Silvie Defraoui and her late partner Chérif Defraoui demonstrated in their collaborative work *Archives du futur* ("Archives of the Future," 1975), collections are repositories of knowledge with great potential.

The fluid combination of images from the past, visual memories, and their resulting insights had long been art historian Aby Warburg's (1866–1929) main subject of research. He sought to establish a comprehensive cultural science with no borders between the disciplines, which led him to develop his iconological method, thus paving the way for our modern approach to art-historical research. Warburg's transdisciplinary approach remains highly topical, as the plethora of new publications and colloquia on his work attest. Therefore, the section of this book devoted to art opens with Dorothee Bauerle-Willert's contribution on Warburg's picture atlas and

cultural studies library. Warburg's mobile library and his last, unfinished project, the *Mnemosyne* picture atlas—a dynamic arrangement of individual images—created a *Denkraum*, a “space for thought,” whose flexibility continuously generates new questions and insights.

Since 1989, the Swiss artist and musician Hans Witschi has lived in New York, where—impressed by the quality of American print media, especially the *New York Times*—he began to systematically collect press photographs. His rapidly growing collection of images featuring hands soon flooded beyond the confines of his sketchbook. The resulting *Handbook* is an exemplary specimen of collections' and systems' artistic applications. Witschi has experimented with both the material and haptic aspects of this work, as well as digital solutions for how to best present it. He is currently working on bringing his pictorial and other artistic work together in a complete digital archive.

Hans Petschar, director of the picture collection and graphics department at the Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek (Austrian National Library), vividly describes efforts to create a catalog for Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II's library in his contribution, “Notes on the Cataloging of Vienna's Imperial Library.” He chronicles how Gottfried van Swieten, prefect of the Imperial Library in Vienna, enlisted library officials and an expanded staff of assistants to create an “organized, complete” catalog during the summer months of 1780 and 1781. The use of outside consultants meant the work had to be uniformly coordinated, so general rules were drawn up dictating how the books were to be described. Although the primary catalog (listing author and title) was completed, they never managed to complete a catalog arranged by subject. Swiss historian Johann Müller—who in 1800, against van Swieten's wishes, was named the library's first curator—wrote a letter reporting that the library's several hundred thousand volumes were not arranged in any kind of systematic order. Van Swieten was against the idea of a subject-based catalog, and argued that a purely mathematical, absolute classification of the disciplines was not possible. Much like Diderot, he believed that such designations were invariably subjective, and therefore felt it made no sense to establish any systematic order.

### **New Orders of Knowledge**

Anthon Astrom, Fabian Wegmüller, and Lukas Zimmer also offer new possibilities for using digital media to envision systems of knowledge organization. For the past five years, these three researchers have been exploring how reading and writing on digital surfaces compares to the use of more traditional, paper-based media. They have found that most people's thought processes are still significantly shaped by classical orders of knowledge, especially the structure and culture of the book, which is considered our

primary form of knowledge to date. Astrom, Wegmüller, and Zimmer came up with their own targeted projects, examining topics, such as how so-called bodies of knowledge can arise in the digital realm, and how such applications allow for new ways of representing relationship networks. Given the practical benefits of such systems, Astrom, Wegmüller, and Zimmer also organized a workshop prior to the symposium, featuring exercises relating to the Sitterwerk art library's pilot project.

Christian Kern, agronomist and owner of InfoMedis AG, has many years of experience working with RFID technology in libraries, and helped implement its use at Sitterwerk. His contribution, "RFID: Applications and Implications—A Foundation for the Internet of Things," shows how, some thirty years after its development, RFID has become a part of everyday life. It isn't widely known that RFID was first used for livestock management. Nowadays, ski areas wouldn't be economically viable without it, and even hospitals depend on it to manage patient data. In the latter part of his chapter, Kern explains the development and application of this technology at Sitterwerk.

Design researcher Claudia Mareis analyzes the humanities' growing interest in design practices and design-related issues in her contribution, "Design Research and 'Mode 2' Knowledge Production." A key step in knowledge-production and diffusion processes involves their material manifestation, be it as lecture, essay, book, archive, or patent—and because this form is physical, it must be designed. How might various forms of representation and visualization—charts, graphs, etc.—promote or inhibit the communication of knowledge? The idea of a *design turn* in cultural studies aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Since the latter half of the twentieth century, knowledge has been produced not only through traditional academic means (Mode 1), but also through the context of its application, now its primary form of production, which is both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary (Mode 2). In this sense, design must play an active, formative, mediating role in interdisciplinary discourse, giving form to knowledge.



## Looking Ahead

The two-day symposium brought together these speakers and an engaged audience, sparking an ongoing dialogue. The Sitterwerk will continue to broaden its network through conversations with additional partners; it considers itself a think tank of sorts, incubating innovative approaches toward knowledge and organizational systems. As Felix Lehner describes in his text, related research projects, workshops, and regular meetings are already in the works.

The catalogs of both the art library and the material archive's holdings, as well as their dynamic systems of organization, can be explored at [www.sitterwerk-katalog.ch](http://www.sitterwerk-katalog.ch).

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