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The Materiality of Information: Fiona Tan's Odes to Bygone Data Systems

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For her show in Grand-Hornu, the artist delves into the Mundaneum, a 19th-century utopian project to classify all human knowledge



In the closing years of the 19th century, Belgian lawyers Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine commenced a project to classify all human knowledge and make it universally accessible. Many decades before big business dubbed data 'the new oil' and the emergence of the information economy, Otlet and La Fontaine imagined their index-card system as a powerful tool for world peace: with understanding, they believed, would come an end to antagonism and destruction.

Otlet and La Fontaine's utopian Mundaneum was never finished – how could such a Borgesian project ever reach conclusion? Until the German occupation of Brussels in 1940, their growing archive was housed in the city's Palais du Cinquenaire. By then, it extended to some 12 million index cards, arranged according to their Universal Decimal Classification system. What survives is now in the Belgian city of Mons, where the artist Fiona Tan immersed herself in Otlet and La Fontaine's world for two years ahead of her exhibition at nearby Grand-Hornu.



Fiona Tan, 'Shadow Archive', 2019, exhibition view, Musée des Arts Contemporains, Grand-Hornu. Courtesy: the artist and Musée des Arts Contemporains, Grand-Hornu

This is not Tan's first deep archival dive. Included here are her earlier works *Depot* (2015) and *Inventory* (2012), in which she explores, respectively, the assembled worlds of marine history collections and Sir John Soane's Museum in London. The Mundaneum offers the artist-filmmaker none of those archives' intriguing visual flair: here are no jars of baby turtles, no cracked classical statuary – only the inscrutable facades of wooden cabinets. Setting aside her camera, Tan has instead turned to virtual space to realize the architectural structure Otlet dreamed of for his grand bibliography. *Archive* (2019) leads us through a digital labyrinth of filing cabinets, fanning out like a vast, multi-layered panopticon beneath a leaded-glass dome.

Tan's digital rendering of the Mundaneum is gloomy, deserted, sinister: a relic of an era when world knowledge still seemed within human grasp. Arranged in vitrines in the real space of the gallery are Otlet's notes and correspondence. We see him redrafting near-identical plans and schematics over decades, lobbying indefatigably, his obsession bordering on mania. It has become a commonplace to describe the Mundaneum as a precursor to the internet. Tan's selection from Otlet's paper suggests the project as something closer to a proto European Union: a centralized bureaucratic scheme promoting peace between nations from its Brussels headquarters.

Politics is never far away in Tan's elegantly conceived exhibition. Each work explores subtly different power dynamics of research, collecting, naming, archiving, display and interpretation. Filmed in six different media, and focusing on the cluttered oddness of Soane's collection, *Inventory* raises questions about why certain objects are prized, and what logic should dictate their arrangement. As Tan's camera pans across starfish and cephalopods, the voice-over in *Depot* describes naming as a colonial act: a taking of territory. While ostensibly a peace project, the Mundaneum's panopticon form immediately suggests Jeremy Bentham's late-18th-century designs for prison surveillance and Michel Foucault's discussion of penal regimes.



Fiona Tan, 'Shadow Archive', 2019, exhibition view, Musée des Arts Contemporains, Grand-Hornu. Courtesy: the artist and Musée des Arts Contemporains, Grand-Hornu

Systems of classification, however utopian, impose values and viewpoints on the entities and ideas that fall within them. Western Europeans are long used to being the imposers. In the final work, *Circular Ruins* (2019), Tan creates a system according to another key. Concentric circles of suspended ropes relay the titular 1940 short story by Jorge Luis Borges in Quipu, the Inca language of knots. Cast suddenly into illiteracy, we read the sculpture instead through sense memory. The suspended ropes recall changing rooms in old coalmines; their smell of tar smacks of the harbourside; the circular form apes the modern industrial ruins of Grand-Hornu itself. All echo the temple and cycle described in Borges's *Circular Ruins*: generations without end pouring knowledge into new life, only to discover the futility and illusoriness of their existence.

Fiona Tan, 'Shadow Archive' is on view at Musée des Arts Contemporains, Grand-Hornu, until 1 September.

Main image: Fiona Tan, 'Shadow Archive', 2019, exhibition view, Musée des Arts Contemporains, Grand-Hornu. Courtesy: the artist and Musée des Arts Contemporains, Grand-Hornu

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