

## KATZ CONTEMPORARY

### „Wunderkammer, Kunstkammer“

In an essay on the little-known English philosopher John Wilkins, Jorge Luis Borges reviewed some of the organizational methods by which men have attempted to bring a sense of order into the world around them. In addition to Wilkins's forty-part language table which represents the culmination of the seventeenth-century movement toward the creation of a universal language, Borges further mentions a Chinese encyclopedia that divides animals "into (a) those that belong to the emperor; (b) embalmed ones; (c) those that are trained; (d) sucking pigs; (e) mermaids; (f) fabulous ones; (g) stray dogs; (h) those that are included in this classification; (i) those that tremble as if they were mad; (j) innumerable ones; (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's-hair brush; (l) etcetera; (m) those that have just broken the flower vase; (n) those that at a distance resemble flies." Indeed, it was after reading about this encyclopedia in Borges's 1942 essay that Michel Foucault was prompted to undertake his investigation of "The Order of Things" (as his 1966 book *Les Mots et les Choses* is titled in English), in an effort to excavate "the fundamental codes of a culture." What Foucault did not know is that this "certain Chinese encyclopedia" was an invention of Borges's. It was thus created from within the very structure of modernity that Foucault had set out to undermine. Yet the conclusions of both writers remain valid: whichever classifications we apply, they are necessarily temporary and speculative (Borges), and the classifications that we find are neither the only ones possible nor necessarily the best (Foucault).

The Kunst- und Wunderkammern of the early modern period provided the origins of the art gallery and the museum as we know them today. But we easily forget that Madame Tussaud's collection of wax likenesses and the Natural History Museum are as much legitimate heirs to the cabinet of curiosities as the often aseptic white boxes in which the worship of art, this latest incarnation of the *devotio moderna* takes place. **huber.huber's** installation "Mikrouniversum und andere kleine Systeme" alludes to many of the elements that the Wunderkammer once comprised: Meteorites appear in idyllic landscapes; saints from late-medieval panel paintings are visited by insects that seemed to have escaped from the plates of scientific books; and the creatures in some of their pen-and-ink drawings seem to stand in for Borges's category (k) of animals "drawn with a very fine camel's-hair brush." The birdhouses made by **huber.huber** from found materials and originally installed in locations around New York even escape the confines of the gallery in order to attract winged city-dwellers, reminding us that a proper Wunderkammer might also have been complemented by a menagerie of living curiosities. Can all the "other little systems" referred to in the present show's title be decoded and classified? We can all try—but chances are that **huber.huber** stay a step ahead of any such attempt: with each motif a new category might emerge and a new system arise within their artistic "micro universe". And so we can only concede with Borges that "there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and speculative."

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*huber.huber: Mikrouniversum und andere kleine Systeme*, Exh. cat. C.G. Boerner New York, 2007, p. 6.