

Saturday, September 6, 2014

13 – 18h, De Waag, Amsterdam

UNFINISHED SYSTEMS OF NON-KNOWLEDGE (PART 1)

on the relation between
art, knowledge and science



DE APPEL
ARTS CENTRE

13:00

OPENING and INTRODUCTION

by CHRISTEL VESTERS

*Some Thoughts on the Potential
of (Art as) Non-Knowledge*

13:20

THE THEATRUM ANATOMICUM

by FRANK KRESIN

*A short Introduction to the History
and Use of the Theatrum Anatomicum*

13:30

LECTURE by VINCENT ICKE

*Unfinished Business: Christiaan
Huygens, Art and Science*

14:30

BREAK

14:45

PERFORMANCE by JOCHEN DEHN

*School for Invisibility – Animal
Technologies, Soap Films and Miracles*

15:45

BREAK

16:00

LECTURE-PRESENTATION by
NATASHA GINWALA

The Citizen of the World

17:00

WRAP-UP by BARBARA VISSER
and CHRISTEL VESTERS

*Where art and science meet, and
why they should meet more often*

17:15

DRINKS

18:30

DOORS CLOSE

Can or does art produce its own kind of knowledge? And if so, what kind of knowledge is this? What drives it, and how does it operate? Where is the overlap or synergy with more accepted and formal domains and methods of knowledge production, such as the 'hard' sciences? And what value do we place on curiosity and imagination in today's knowledge-driven economy? To answer these questions *Unfinished Systems of Non-Knowledge (Part 1)* explores the dialogues between art, knowledge and science. Together with an astrophysicist, a curator and two artists we will revisit examples from the early Modern period when art and science were not yet strictly separate disciplines, and when curiosity and an unbound imagination were driving forces for many new discoveries.

* The title 'Unfinished Systems of Non-Knowledge' refers to the fifth volume in Georges Bataille's incomplete and unpublished *La Somme atheologique*; which collected his writings, aphorisms, notes, lectures and musings a.o. on the ideas of inner experience, meditation and radical theology.

Art and Knowledge

The relationship between art, knowledge and science, is complex and not without controversy. In the history of the West, art has traditionally been identified as 'another form of knowledge' – knowledge that does not spring from the intellect, but from intuitive or speculative imagination. As such, 'art as knowledge' avoids or undermines the laws of objective logic and the stability of our linear and logo-centric knowledge systems. Or so the story goes. But if we take a closer look, we will discover that these distinctions are not as black and white, and that it might be more productive to opt for a third term, something the South African art theoretician Sarat Maharaj has called 'nonknowledge'.

Maharaj is not the first to suggest a redefinition of the conventional paradigm of art versus science equals subjective versus objective. Maharaj, like other artists, scientist and philosophers before him, looked at the concept of non-knowing as a mode of critique; questioning our ideal of a world knowable, measurable and thus able to be mas-

tered through that force of logic, reason and knowledge. Allegedly, Charles Darwin mockingly compared the mathematician's desire to catalogue, explain and draw clear pictures of nature with 'a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that isn't there.'

Power of Imagination, or, it all starts with a question

The three presenters today, all grapple with this phenomenon of nonknowledge and non-knowing as an alternative mode to relate to and understand the world around us. The examples and experiments they will present all seem to test conventional ideas of knowledge and models of knowledge production, occupying that ambiguous space in-between (what we know and not yet know), looking for ways to communicate and express their findings. Another recurring theme throughout the day is the friction between empirical and rational modes of knowing, between seeing and knowing, and the quest to explore the un-known, to imagine beyond the visible, in short, to search for new possibilities of knowledge.

In a recent *YouTube* video, astrophysicist and artist Vincent Icke paraphrases the White Queen from *Alice in Wonderland*, saying 'Some days I have believed more than six impossible things before breakfast.' Icke continues that it is more important to create knowledge than to possess it, but the emphasis here seems to be on the verb believing. All research, or search for knowledge, starts with a question, with curiosity, but also with a belief that what we do not yet know or see, and cannot yet prove, might nonetheless be true.

In his lecture Vincent Icke will discuss what it means to do research, whether in 'hard' sciences or in the arts amongst others by looking at the work and discoveries of the 17th-century scientist, Christiaan Huygens. Exploring the wondrous world of the universe, the summum of a *terra incognita* Huygens set out to prove and measure the invisible like light waves and gravity. Huygens was not only a gifted mathematician, astronomer and physicist whose contribution to the development of the telescope resulted in pioneering discoveries, but he was also one of the first writers

of science fiction. His *Cosmotheoros*, published in 1698, speculates in great detail about the existence of life on other planets.

The tension between rational and speculative modes of knowledge production, between objective perception and imagination, was a recurring theme in the lives and works of the six 19th-century protagonists captured in *Double Lives*, a research project developed by curator and researcher Natasha Ginwala for this year's 8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art. Taking the scientific discoveries, image-making and personal biographies of these hybrid individuals as her lead, Ginwala explores their lives at the intersection of Modernity, knowledge formation and Empire – as multifaceted attempts in constructing what may be termed an 'Image of the World'. Ginwala is particularly interested in connecting modes of image-making that lie at the crossroads of art and science, with the early history of photography and another invention from that same period – the stereoscope. This optical device animates images by using two

images to make one, with the effect of depth and mass. It is examined as an epistemic tool to survey these ambiguous figures and the dialectical forms of knowing their time and place in history.

Jochen Dehn is as much a scientist, inventor and explorer as he is an artist. Seeking inspiration from meteoric collisions and ancient rock crystals, he seeks to expand the boundaries of knowledge. Many of his performances take the form of experiments, yet are never conceived with a specific goal in mind, intended rather as open-ended inquiries. In his performance *School for Invisibility – Animal Technologies, Soap Films and Miracles* Dehn seeks to discover the possibilities of becoming less concrete, more diffuse, and of dissolving oneself without disappearing. Using methodologies and demonstrations from natural science disciplines to examine phenomena pertaining to the invisible, together with his audience, Dehn considers theoretical and philosophical issues such as the nature of a moment, an instant, and the environment.

During his demonstration-performance, viewers are continuously set on the wrong foot, as the artist toys with the limitations of our thinking, testing our need for proof as a condition to know or believe. The idea of becoming invisible without disappearing becomes a metaphor for our current condition or need to understand, to know through scientific facts and objective deduction, and to only believe what we can know (to be true). But what if we cannot understand or comprehend what our eyes can see? Do we dismiss it, or do we cross the threshold and enter a space of imagination, curious intuitions, speculations and the unknown. Dehn takes his audience along with him as he makes use of hard facts to create a different model of thought, one in which one plus one can be three.

Between Lecture Theatre and Laboratory

The complexities of these confrontations between art and science vis-à-vis ideas of knowledge, could never be cov-

ered in one afternoon, nor should we want to. The programme today is loosely assembled in a deliberately fragmentary and "unfinished" structure and will bring together different ideas on *and* examples of 'other knowledge'. It will articulate the gaps and black holes, rather than presenting a coherent and picture-perfect knowledge. The lectures, performances and presentations, juxtapose philosophical reflection and theoretical exposés with hands-on experiments and experiences of art-as-knowledge. In doing so, *Unfinished Systems of Non-Knowledge* seeks to combine the lecture theatre with the laboratory, or, to put it differently, to explore the boundaries between rational with empirical modes of knowledge production. And we couldn't have found a more appropriate location in Amsterdam to do so, than the Theatrum Anatomicum in the landmark De Waag. In the 17th Century the location was used by the Surgeons Guild as a teaching auditorium. As such it was a site where empirical forms of the production and transfer of knowledge took place. In addition, its particular

architecture evoked not only a collective experience of wonder and exploration, but also a sense of collective knowledge, something that in today's modes of knowledge production is almost extinct. Especially Jochen Dehn's performance seeks to re-animate this atmosphere of collective wonder and curiosity that was characteristic of the French 17th and 18th Century Science Salons.

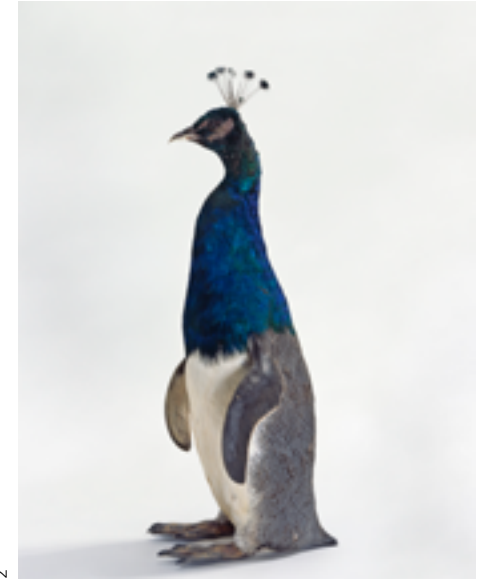
Unfinished Systems of
Non-Knowledge

Unfinished Systems of Non-Knowledge (Part 1) is the first part of an on-going research project developed by curator, writer and researcher Christel Vesters, and a prelude to a three-day event in the winter of 2014-2015. The multi-parted research project investigates and tests the potential of art as an alternative knowledge system, and explores their subversive agency vis-à-vis the dominant ideas on knowledge and models of knowing.

1. Emma Hart Willard (1787–1870) and William C. Woodbridge (1794 – 1845), *Progress of The Roman Empire, Illustrated by the Course of the River Amazon*, 1824. Courtesy Natasha Ginwala and the David Rumsey Map Collection.
2. Thomas Grünfeld, *Misfit (Penguin/Peacock)*, 2005. Courtesy of the artist.
3. Theatrum Anatomicum De Waag, Amsterdam. Photo by Eddo Hartmann, 2012.



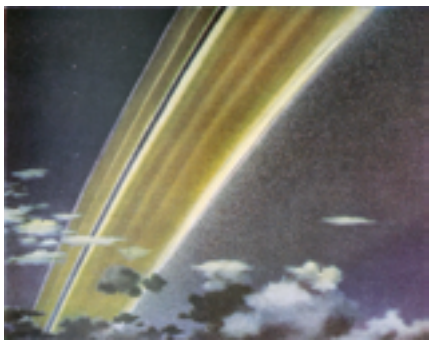
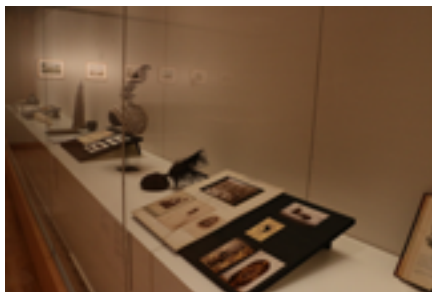
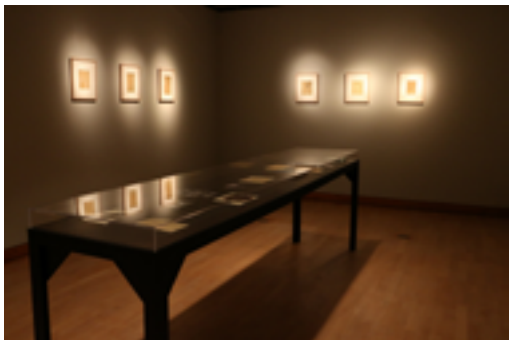
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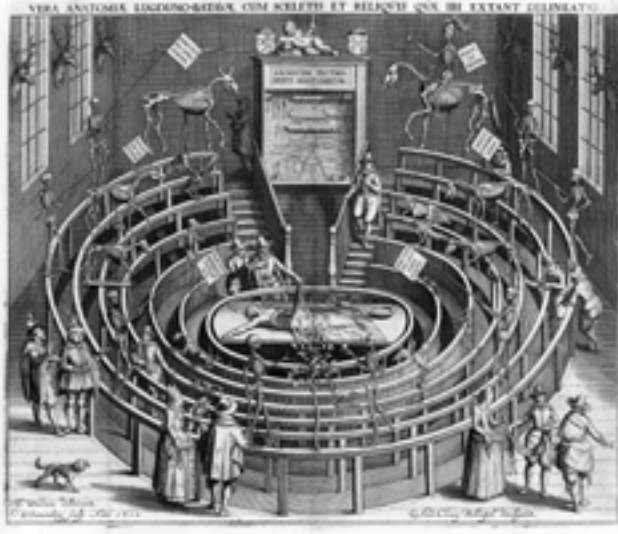
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14

15



16



17



18

4. Christiaan Huygens' drawing of Saturn from 1669 and of Saturn and Titan from a letter to Chapelain.
5. Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1852-1934). Installation View. *Double Lives*, 8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, 2014. Photo by Angela Anderson.
6. Rudolph and Leopold Blaschka, Actinophrys sol Glaucus longicirrus, glass model works of sea urchins / creatures. Photo by James Turner. Courtesy National Museum Wales, Cardiff.
7. Chesley Bonestell, Painting of Saturn's rings. Around 1950s.
8. Jochen Dehn, *Five Easy Pieces, Le nid de Furnarius Rufus*, 2012, performance. Courtesy Crèvecoeur, Paris.
9. Vincent Icke. Photo by Astrid Koppers.
10. Jochen Dehn, *Trainingsobjekt zum Denken in 4 räumlichen Dimensionen*, 2009, Courtesy Gallery Aanant & Zoo, Berlin and the artist.

11. Emin Pasha (1840-1892). Installation View, *Double Lives*, 8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, 2014. Photo by Angela Anderson.
12. Barbara Visser. Photo by Jussi Puikkonen.
13. Ceiling Theatrum Anatomicum De Waag with 87 coats of arms, Photo by Eddo Hartmann, 2012.
14. Christel Vesters. Photo by Herman van de Wal.
15. Engraving of the Theatrum Anatomicum Leiden, 1610. Collection Museum Boerhaave, Leiden.
16. Jochen Dehn, *Why stand when you can Fall*, performance KW Institute, Berlin, 2013. Courtesy KW Institute Berlin and the artist.
17. Aurélien Froment, *Pulmo Marina*, 2010, videostill. Courtesy of the artist, Marcelle Alix and Motive Gallery.
18. Natasha Ginwala. Photo by Gaurang Anand.

Christel Vesters

Christel Vesters (Wezep, 1972) is an art critic, researcher and curator based in Amsterdam and London. Christel studied art history and curating in Amsterdam, New York, and London and holds an MA in Art History from the University of Amsterdam. She recently started her PhD at the Royal College of Art in London on the subject of contemporary art and the representation and production of alternative art knowledge systems.

Christel Vesters regularly writes for international art publications such as *Metropolis M*, *Flash Art* and *Afterall*. She has contributed to many artist publications and exhibition catalogues and has published a number of essays on art in public space, the crossovers between art, architecture and design, and on the subject of art and knowledge. She has curated various exhibitions and discursive projects, including the successful lecture series and publication *Now is the Time: Art & Theory in the 21st Century* (2009) in collaboration with the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and the University of Amsterdam. From 2009 to 2011, Christel was a member of the curatorial

team at the Netherlands Architecture Institute where she was responsible for the institute's international public program and platform activities. She recently re-joined the Stedelijk Museum as editor of the *Global Collaborations* project's online platform. Christel also teaches art theory at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam.

Vincent Icke

Vincent Icke (Utrecht, 1946) is Professor of Theoretical Astrophysics at the University of Leiden and Affiliate Professor of Cosmology at the University of Amsterdam. He studied theoretical physics at the University of Leiden. His dissertation, *Formation of Galaxies Inside Clusters*, was presented in 1972. He continued postdoctoral research at the universities of Sussex and Cambridge and the California Institute of Technology. His current cosmology research is on the origins of structure in the universe, the 'cosmological constant', and 'radiation hydrodynamics'.

Actively involved in increasing awareness of the sciences among the

general public, Vincent Icke publishes in Dutch national newspapers and magazines, such as *NRC Handelsblad*, *Natuurwetenschap & Techniek* and *Intermediair*. He is a regular guest on informative television broadcasts like *De Wereld Draait Door* and *Nieuwslicht*. His many publications include *The force of symmetry* (1995), *Christiaan Huygens in de onvoltooid verleden toekomstige tijd* (2005), *Dat kan ik me niet voorstellen* (2009), *De ruimte van Christiaan Huygens* (2009), *De Principes van Huygens* (2013) and *Gravity does not exist* (2014)

Vincent Icke is not only an astrophysicist, but also a visual artist. Not surprisingly, his artistic work is inspired by the visual beauty and wonder of the details of the cosmos.

Jochen Dehn

Jochen Dehn (Hamburg, 1968) is as much a scientist, inventor and explorer as he is an artist. Seeking inspiration from meteoric collisions and ancient rock crystals, he seeks to expand the boundaries of knowledge and consistently succeeds in creating absurd

scenarios. Many of his performances take the form of experiments, yet are never conceived with a specific goal in mind, intended rather as open-ended inquiries. He welcomes setbacks, collapses and obstacles as ingredients in his work. His performances often consist of lessons, demonstrations, workshops or experiments, each of which is doomed to partial failure (total failure would constitute too much of an achievement). He has devised participatory games, such as a misguided tour of the Louvre involving unsuccessful attempts to outwit motion detectors and alarms, and carried out research for a material that 'permits traceless transit', as in the construction of a door you can walk through without having to open.

Jochen Dehn has worked, exhibited and performed at numerous international institutes, including Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Hayward Gallery in London, the Volksbühne in Berlin and the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg. He participated in the 11th Lyon Biennial of Contemporary Art in 2011 and the 51st Venice Biennial in 2005.

Natasha Ginwala

Natasha Ginwala (Ahmedabad, India, 1985) is an independent curator, researcher, and writer. She was part of the artistic team of the 8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art 2014. Recent projects include: *Landings*, a multi-part curatorial project seeking crossover readings of colonial modernity, geomorphology, corporeality and the rural (2013–ongoing, with Vivian Zihel), Witte de With, Rotterdam, and several partner organizations as well as *The Museum of Rhythm* at Taipei Biennial 2012 (with Anselm Franke). Taking an approach of immanent relatedness between scientific, aesthetic, and mercantile histories of the 19th and early 20th centuries, her research revolves around the specific ways in which scientific and esoteric attitudes fade in and out of contemporary artistic forms.

Barbara Visser

From the beginning of her career, Barbara Visser (Haarlem, 1966) has been occupied with the relationship between registration and dramatization.

Visser's work is driven by fascinations around original and copy, historical narratives and constructed biographies, which she translates into subjective documentaries. By questioning the authenticity of images and their interpretation by the viewer, she influences the shape and the content of the work simultaneously. Projects are executed in an array of media: photography, film, video, text, printed matter and performance. Infiltrating into existing systems leads to a wide diversity of works.

Her work is in the collection of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the Municipal Museum of The Hague and the Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam. Barbara Visser has received the David Röell Prijs (2007) and Dr A.H. Heineken Prize for Art (2008), among other awards.

Earlier this year, Barbara was elected as Chair of the newly established Society of Arts, a new initiative of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Science and Arts with the aim to give artists a place to share ideas with professionals in other artistic and scientific disciplines and discuss the role of art in society and the relationship between art and science.

THEATRUM ANATOMICUM IN DE WAAG

Unfinished Systems of Non-Knowledge (Part 1) takes place in the historic anatomical theatre of the landmark De Waag building, one of Amsterdam's original city gates. Used by the Surgeons Guild as a teaching auditorium in the 17th century, it was a place where empirical forms of the production and transfer of knowledge took place, as is pictured in Rembrandt's famous painting from 1632, *The Anatomical Lesson of Dr. Tulp*. This exceptional location is a perfect setting for an exploration of the relationships between art, science and discovery.

The Waag's Theatrum Anatomicum was built in 1691 as a space dedicated to advanced experimenting, observing and learning. The theatre was usually a room of roughly amphitheatrical shape, in the centre of which would stand the table on which the leading figures of the surgeon's guild dissected the corpses of many criminals to expose the anatomy of the

human body and help advance medical science. Around this table were several circular, elliptic or octagonal tiers with railings, where students or other observers could stand and get a good view of the dissection. At later stages these dissections turned into events where not just medical professionals or students, but also the man in the street could have a glance at this intriguing, taboo-breaking world of new discoveries. For this part of the audience, the spots higher up on the amphitheatric benches were available at low prices.

Today, after several constructional modifications, the original floor of the Theatrum has moved up and the benches are gone. But the room still bears the traces of this time and through its octagonal shape invites you to imagine its former function as a stage for hands-on experimental research.

CURIOSITY

ART AND THE PLEASURES OF KNOWING

28 June – 14 September 2014

De Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam

This summer de Appel arts centre presents *Curiosity*, curated by Brian Dillon, an exhibition that moves wittily, sometimes mysteriously, between contemporary art, anatomy, Old Master drawings, the history of criminology, Cold War secrets, the origins of museums, and voyeurism in everyday life. Taking as a starting point the cabinets of curiosities that flourished throughout Europe in the 17th century, *Curiosity* presents a detailed meditation on the nature of wonder, fascination and inquiry.

Like its ancestor the *Wunderkammer*, this exhibition happily juxtaposes past and present, to create a picture of knowledge and invention that is both encyclopaedic and highly eccentric. Attention and concentration are recurrent themes of the exhibition. Under hypnosis, Matt Mullican videos himself becoming deeply interested in his own shoe and other objects. Gerard Byrne films and photographs the territory around Loch Ness, and produces a compelling map of the frontiers between art, science and fantasy.

Visitors to *Curiosity* will encounter such recent works among an intriguing

array of historical artefacts. A collection of patterned and coloured stones that belonged to the Surrealist writer Roger Caillois forms part of a long tradition of artists projecting their visions onto the natural world. The German glassmakers Leopold and Rudolph Blaschka did not call themselves artists, but in the late nineteenth century they produced an astonishing array of exquisitely detailed models of aquatic creatures. However, curiosity has a less alluring history too; the Center for Land Use Interpretation, a scholarly-artistic institute based in Los Angeles will exhibit a series of Rolodexes and index cards that once belonged to the US nuclear facility at Los Alamos. Bearing the names and addresses of contractors hired by the government, they attest to an era of intense military-industrial secrecy.

The exhibition – developed and mounted in association with *Cabinet* magazine – is accompanied by a suitably playful, and informative book that includes essays by Marina Warner and Brian Dillon.

Unfinished Systems of Non-Knowledge (Part 1) is curated by critic, curator and researcher Christel Vesters and is part of a long-term research project, exploring and testing the potential of art as alternative knowledge system.

The event was realised in collaboration with de Appel arts centre and made possible with the generous support of LAPS – Lectoraat Art and Public Space, the Gerrit Rietveld Akademie Amsterdam, Waag Society and the Mondriaan Fund.

LAPS

 **DE APPEL**
ARTS CENTRE



waag society

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Texts

Christel Vesters
Marieke Isthā
Guus van Engelshoven
and the participants

Design

Merel Karman

English proofreading

Mari Shields

Image Cover

Laurent Grasso, *Specola Vaticana, (John G. Hagen S. J., in front of the telescope at the Vatican Observatory, c. 1910)*, 2012.

Courtesy of the artist.

De Appel arts centre
Prins Hendrikkade 142
1011 AT Amsterdam

Opening hours:
Tue–Sun, 11am to 6pm

unfinished-systems-of-nonknowledge.org

