

After Alexandria

CACSA Project Space

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The Library of Alexandria occupies a particular place in the tales of human knowledge. The fabled library of antiquity was the product of a group of scholars, backed by generations of patronage from the Egyptian royalty, with the ambitious task of acquiring all the books in the world. It is heralded as one of the most significant libraries of the ancient world, and before being irreparably damaged by fires anywhere between 48 BC to 642 AD, it championed the first attempts to systematically organise literary knowledge.¹

To understand the Library of Alexandria is to understand the inflation of myth. Estimates of the library's collection place it anywhere between 40,000 and 700,000 scrolls.² Even the library's demise is a continuing topic of speculation and debate, with different scholars attributing the library's burning to multiple figures and events across history. In the space of this speculation, however, grew the Library of Alexandria as an embodiment of human endeavour. It is a symbol of the need to explore and understand, but also of a loss of knowledge – its own antiquarian tragedy.

The library provides an analogy for the core concerns of this body of work. *After Alexandria* grapples with 'systems' of lost, fragmented or reconstituted knowledge. Comprised of handwritten memos, pieces of maps and compressed information, these works examine 'systems' as the human means of organizing knowledge – but like the library (and all things we make) they eventually fail and break. Also like the library, *After Alexandria* witnesses how we 'fill in the blanks' between what is known with what is speculated.

These works are concerned with a 'systemic frontier' – a point at which systems are established to configure exterior chaos into order. Epistemological pursuits such as science and academia, in their attempts to measure the world, are cantilevered off the edge of knowledge into the unknown. As Karen Barad writes, 'measurement is a meeting of the "natural" and the "social". It is a potent moment in the construction of scientific knowledge – it is an instance where matter and meaning meet in a very literal sense.'³

The academic systems presented here are fraught with speculations and potentials, each bearing a degree of loss or corruption. The works question how many pieces are required to recover this knowledge; how many more integers are required to solve the equation. They challenge our ability to fill in the gaps towards an objective truth – suggesting that we instead generate knowledge circumstantially, to suit the situation, instead of a binary 'correct/incorrect' attitude towards information. The organisation of knowledge, the charting of geographies and data, infrastructure, and other means of mediating environments are devices through which we standardise the world. In their breakdown however, they allow for us to witness the dialogue between order and chaos, the point at which a system can no longer order input. The most compelling moments of science are the ones beyond explanation, or when they somehow attempt to contain that which is immense or eternal. It is in these moments that we witness, through the cracks, the complex architecture of our systematic existence.

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Cover image: Ash Tower, *Postcards from the Bibliopolis*, 2013, found paper, resin. Dimensions variable.

¹ Berti, M. Costa, V. 2009, 'The Ancient Library of Alexandria. A Model for Classical Scholarship in the Age of Million Book Libraries', *CLIR Proceedings of the International Symposium on the Scaife Digital Library*. p 15.

² Ibid. p 8.

³ Barad, K. 2007, *Meeting the Universe Halfway – Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham & London. p 67.