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Systema naturae

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The two series of talks titled *Encyclopaedia of Wars* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris since 2008 and the La Comédie theatre in Reims since 2010 have taken up the challenge of providing an ABC of every aspect of every conflict from the Iliad through the Second World War.

This long-term venture approaches the oral as a path to literature. *Encyclopaedia of Wars* is a novel assembled out of quotations and collages. A number of legends have grown out of this improvised narrative: I gradually invented, for example, a role for my paternal grandfather, Jean Jouannais, building a fantasised family history in which he told me of his military exploits. Out of this emerged the intuition that I was practising a kind of ventriloquism, speaking for a grandfather who was relating the history of wars to me: by creating what should in fact have been passed on to me by someone else, I made it my own. In brief, let's say I'm a kind of researcher out to invent the subject matter of his own investigations.

Systema naturae is a group of documents made up of collages and texts whose 'paternity' I attribute to my grandfather, who was born in 1913 in Saint-Angel, in the Allier département, and died in 1945. A sergeant in the army, he drowned himself during a spell as a reservist in the barracks at Montluçon. Born on the eve of the First World War and dead at the close of the Second, he had developed a weird passion for the paraphernalia of war. A very amateur scientist and a crank entomologist, he limited his reading to a single book, Linnaeus's *Systema naturae* (A

General System of Nature), whose first edition goes back to 1735. Linnaeus had gained acceptance for his system of binomial nomenclature - for botany, zoology, etc. - which used a two-word combination to designate any taxon. This became known as the Linnaean system and provided a Latin-based method that has become the international scientific standard for naming the world's species.

Jean Jouannais journey through Linnaeus book was a kind of epic and ultimately a résumé of his entire life. From 1932 until his death he devoted himself to classifying the materials of war as if they were living species. To take one example: 'Self-propelled cannon rightfully belong to the family of Elephants, unlike tanks, which belong to that of the Rhinoceroses; while armoured cars are to be equated with the ungulates - Horses and their cousins.'

His mental derangement showed through only sporadically, as when he believed he could identify males and females among his military impedimenta. He eventually ignored their industrial pedigree, letting his imagination loose on the sexuality and modes of reproduction of these metal birds and mammals. If we disregard the fact that the fundamentals of his enterprise are fallacious through and through, we find very few actual errors in his notations. No more, say, than in the work of French naturalist Buffon, who claimed among other things that swifts 'also are true swallows, and in many respects truer swallows than swallows themselves.'

Jean-Yves Jouannais

3 October

8 November
2014

**GALLERY NIGHT
SIGNATURE**

Thursday 23 October
from 8:00 pm

Les barrages de sable
Ed. Grasset

FORTHCOMING

RICHARD JACKSON
Dark Rooms
14/11 - 20/12

FAIRS

FIAC 23-26/10
booth 0.A08

ABU DHABI ART 5-8/11

ART BASEL MIAMI 5-7/12
booth S11